THE POWER OF FLOW

NewPhilosopher

DISTRACTION RULES

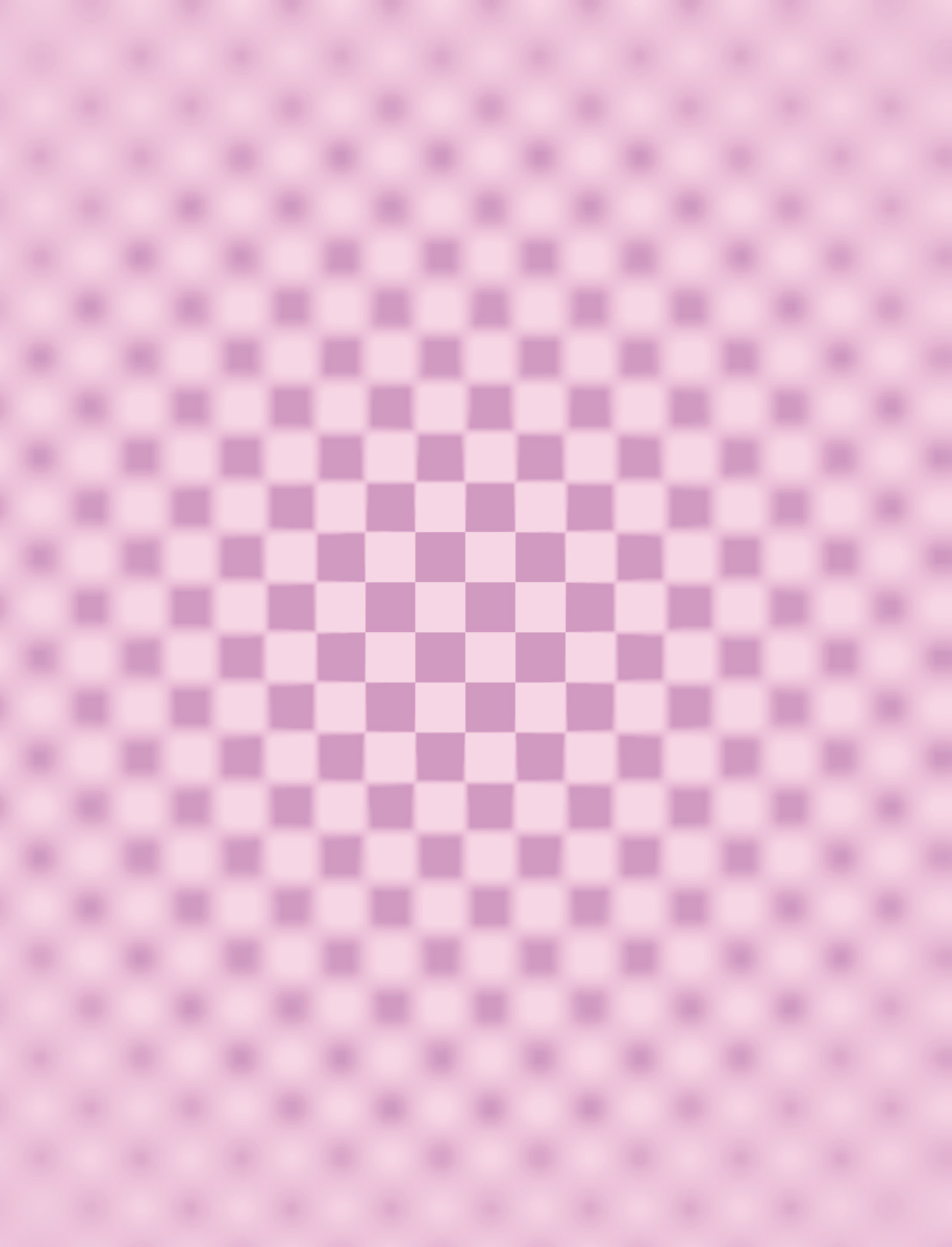
DBC PIERRE
The Trojan horse

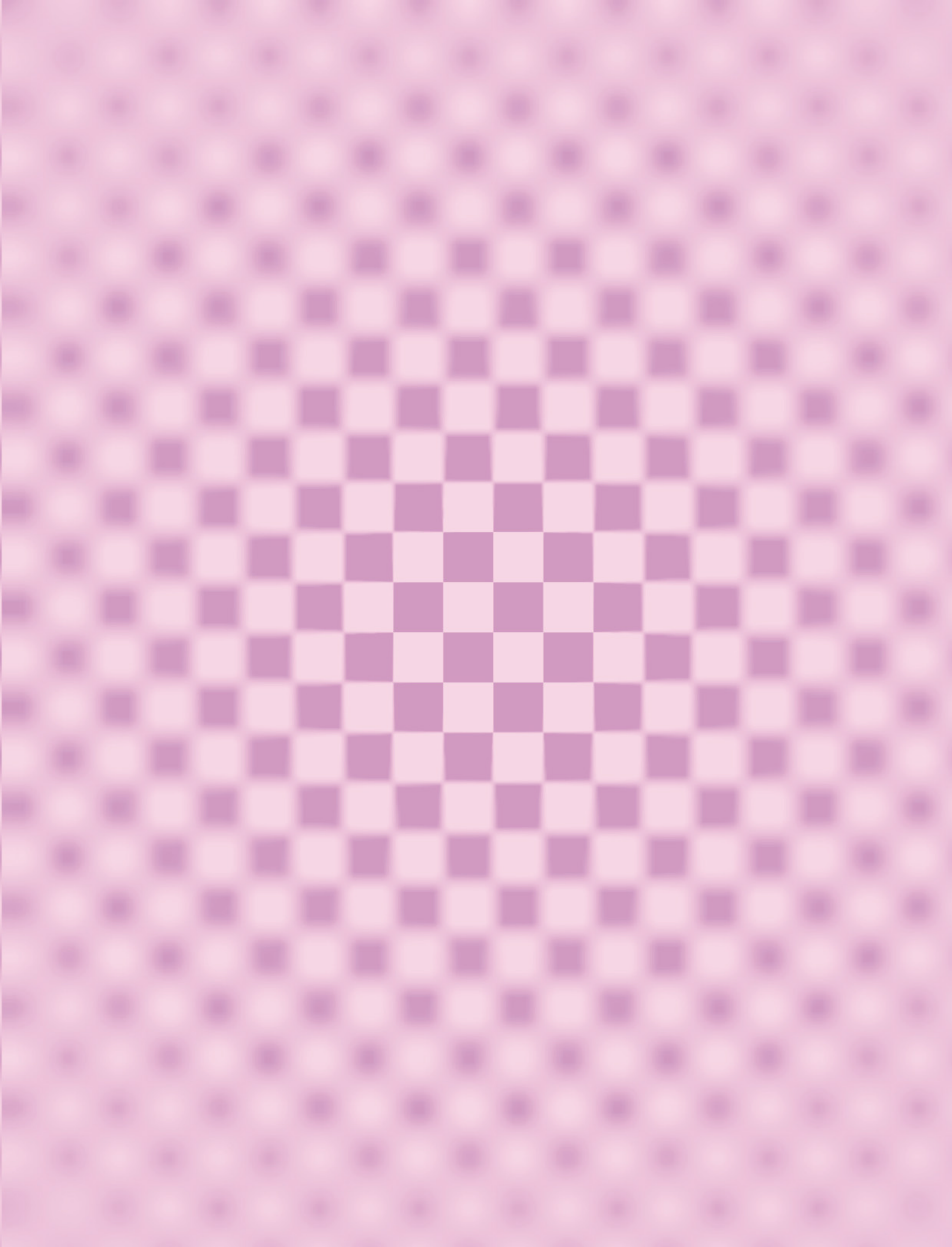
PATRICK STOKES
Mental decluttering

ANTONIA CASE
Being well distracted

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.com





Sounds of distraction

Andrea e Paolo, Short stories, 2013, Photography, by Paolo Ventura

"It is essential for you to remember that the attention you give to any action should be in due proportion to its worth."

— Marcus Aurelius

If I blew a trumpet in your ear while you were reading this, I'd be distracting you. You wouldn't get a sentence straight in your mind. Your brain would be engaged in a juggling act – to read while simultaneously being subjected to the deep brassy notes of the trumpet. In today's technological world of infinite distractions, how much of your life is experienced with the equivalent of trumpets sounding?

A recent study on office workers found that workers average 47 seconds on any screen before switching to another screen. Workers check their inbox on average 77 times a day, and, over the course of a day, switch tasks over 400 times. "We are determined to be interrupted," concluded researcher Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, "if not by others, then by ourselves."

Mark found that many office workers were not compelled to distraction by messages and notifications so much as their own emotions – boredom, worry, as well as their desire to maintain social capital and influence. We use technology to keep us distracted because it's nicer to be shielded by news, posts, weather reports, and messages from friends than to be nakedly exposed to the tempest of our own thoughts. "We labour at our daily work more ardently and thoughtlessly than is necessary to sustain our life," wrote philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, "because to us it is even more necessary not to have leisure to stop and think. Haste is universal because everyone is in flight from himself."

We are right to be wary of our thoughts. Narrow negative thinking, or what's commonly termed rumination, is characteristic of people with anxiety and depression. People who ruminate can do so for days, at considerable cost. The best way out of the maze is, of course, distraction. But distracted by what? By anything really, provided it's in the here and now – the body's movements or breath, focusing on a golf ball as it hurtles across the green, listening attentively to a friend, it doesn't really matter, provided it has nothing to do with thinking. Being in the here and now, experiencing life unfolding before us, has immeasurable benefits. French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil says, "Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it."

Unlike the edgy dopamine pull we get from the anticipation of checking news, social media, and messages, being in the here and now offers a whole host of feel-good chemicals – serotonin, oxytocin, endorphins (like morphine for the brain), and endocannabinoids. Dopamine can have that sickening sense of something depleting within us, whereas these feel-good chemicals can feel more wholesome, more rounded at the edges.

In twenty-five years of research into happiness, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi concluded that people who learn to control their inner experience are more able to determine the quality of their lives, which, he adds: "Is as close as any of us can come to being happy." And the secret to success in the happiness stakes is to achieve control over the contents of your consciousness.

What you may discover after reading this issue of *New Philosopher* is that distraction as such is not the problem. Life is one big distraction. But what, in our day-to-day lives, is pulling us here and there almost without our consent? Is our consciousness blanketed by the trumpeting noise of electronic distractions, or are we using our inclination to distraction to pursue that which really matters to us?

Antonia Case, Editor

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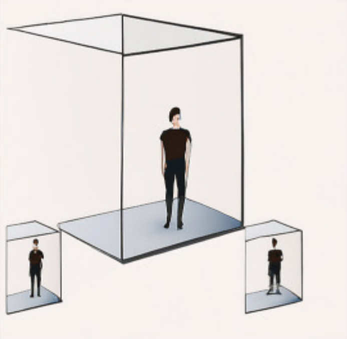
Distraction



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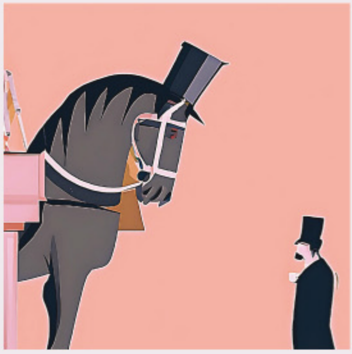

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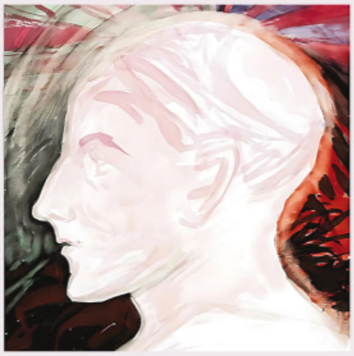

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Contributors

DBC Pierre

DBC Pierre won the Booker Prize for his debut novel *Vernon God Little*, which was also awarded the Whitbread First Novel Award in 2003 – the first time the two awards had been granted to the same book. Pierre is also the author of *Ludmilla's Broken English*, *Lights out in Wonderland*, a book of short stories, and a novella, *Breakfast with the Borgias*. He was awarded the James Joyce Award from the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin.

James M. Lang

James M. Lang, a former Professor of English and Director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption University, is the author of six books, the most recent of which are *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It*, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, and *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*, and *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching*.

Patrick Stokes

Patrick Stokes is Associate Professor in philosophy at Deakin University, Melbourne. He specialises in 19th and 20th century European philosophy, personal identity, narrative selfhood, moral psychology, and death and remembrance. Stokes is the author of *Digital souls: a philosophy of online death*, *The naked self: Kierkegaard and personal identity*, and *Kierkegaard's mirrors: Interest, self, and moral vision.* In 2014 he was awarded the AAP Media Prize.

Nigel Warburton

Nigel Warburton is a freelance philosopher, podcaster, writer, and the Editor-at-large of *New Philosopher*. Described as "one of the most-read popular philosophers of our time", his books include *A Little History of Philosophy*, *Thinking from A to Z*, and *Philosophy: The Classics*. The interviewer for the Philosophy Bites podcast, Warburton was previously Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Open University and Lecturer in Philosophy at Nottingham University.

Stefan van der Stigchel

Stefan van der Stigchel is a professor in Cognitive Psychology at the department of Experimental Psychology at Utrecht University and principal investigator of the research group AttentionLab. Stigchel is author of several popular science books in Dutch, two of which were translated into English as *How Attention Works* and *Concentration*. He regularly appears on television, radio, and in conferences to discuss distraction and concentration.

Jacqueline Winspear

Jacqueline Winspear has written 16 novels in the award-winning Maisie Dobbs historical mystery series, including the *New York Times* bestseller *The American Agent*. Her standalone novel, *The Care and Management of Lies*, was also a *New York Times* and National Bestseller, and a finalist for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Winspear has published two non-fiction books: *What Would Maisie Do?* based upon the series, and a memoir, *This Time Next Year We'll Be Laughing*.

Antonia Case

Antonia Case is Editor of *New Philosopher* and *Womankind*, and is an award-winning writer and journalist. She is the author of *Flourish*, on personal identity and change, published by Bloomsbury in 2023. She was the winner of the 2013 Australasian Association of Philosophy Media Professionals' Award and in 2016 was shortlisted for Editor of the Year in the Stack Awards. Case was selected as 'philosopher in residence' for the 2016 Brisbane Writers' Festival.

Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore

Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore lived in China from 2009 to 2014 during which time she worked as the associate editor for *Time Out Beijing*, the art editor for *Time Out Shanghai*, and as an oped columnist for the *International New York Times*, reporting from China. She writes for *The Guardian, The Economist, Financial Times, The New York Times, Womankind, Wall Street Journal, New Statesman, New Internationalist, The Huffington Post*, and *Time* magazine.

Marina Benjamin

Marina Benjamin is a writer and editor. As a memoirist, she is best known for *The Middlepause*, which offered a poetic and philosophical take on midlife. Benjamin is also the author of *Insomnia* and her new memoir *A Little Give*. She was arts editor of the *New Statesman* and deputy arts editor at the *London Evening Standard*, and is a senior editor at *Aeon*. Her book *Rocket Dreams* was shortlisted for the Eugene Emme Literature Award.

Tom Chatfield

Tom Chatfield is a British writer, broadcaster, and tech philosopher. He is the author of six books, including *Netymology*, *Live This Book!*, and *How to Thrive in the Digital Age*, and speaks around the world on technology, the arts, and media. Chatfield was launch columnist for the BBC's worldwide technology site, BBC Future, is a Visiting Associate at the Oxford Internet Institute, and is a senior expert at the Global Governance Institute.

Russel Herneman

Russel Herneman is an award-winning cartoonist whose work has appeared in *The Times of London*, *Private Eye*, *Prospect*, *The Spectator*, and many others. In 2018 he won Pocket Cartoon of the Year 2018 in the Political Cartoon Awards, European Newspaper Design award for illustration, and Society of News Design Award of excellence for Illustration. He was an exhibitor at the Society of Graphic Fine Art Draw 18 at Mennier Gallery, London.

André Dao

André Dao is a writer and editor who is co-founder of *Behind the Wire*, an oral history project documenting people's experience of immigration detention, and a producer of the Walkley Award winning podcast, *The Messenger*. His work has appeared in *The Monthly*, *Meanjin*, and *Al Jazeera*. Formerly the editor-in-chief of human rights publication *Right Now*, Dao was a finalist for the Australian Human Rights Commission's Young People's Medal in 2011.

Tiger Roholt

Tiger Roholt is an associate professor of philosophy at Montclair State University, where he was Chair of the Philosophy department from 2015–2021. Roholt books include *Key Terms in Philosophy of Art*, *Distracted from Meaning: A Philosophy of Smartphones*, and *Groove: A Phenomenology of Rhythmic Nuance*. His writing has appeared in *Techné*, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

Maggie Jackson

Maggie Jackson is an award-winning social critic and author. Her articles have appeared in publications worldwide, including *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Business Week*. Jackson won the Media Award from the Work-Life Council of the Conference Board and is a graduate of Yale University and the London School of Economics. She is the author of *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* and her new book on uncertainty is forthcoming.

Genís Carreras

Genís Carreras is the cover designer of *New Philosopher* magazine and the creator of *Philographics: Big Ideas in Simple Shapes*. Carreras's work has been recognised in the AOI World Illustration Awards, the Laus Awards, and the Stocks Taylor Benson Awards, and his work has been featured in the books *MIN: New Simplicity in Graphic Design*, *Playing with Type*, *Geometry Makes Me Happy*, and *Geo/Graphics*.

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NewPhilosopher
What is the meaning of life?
Playing in the zone
How power corrupts
On time

Winter Stories #57, *Winter Stories*, 2007, *Photography*, by Paolo Ventura

> "Identifying with our dopamine circuits traps us in a world of speculation and possibility."
>
> **— D. Lieberman & M. Long**

In a laboratory at Runwell Hospital near London, researcher Kathleen Montagu discovered something that explains a lot about you, and plenty about your friends too. It explains your restlessness, your desire to want and achieve more – be that to own a bigger house, a shinier car, a more senior position at work, a new country to reside in, a vacation someplace more exotic than last time. It explains why some have the need to create – words, paintings, businesses, new experiences – or to amass knowledge like a squirrel burying nuts underground. It explains why philosophers have that itch to find meaning, and why executives keep piling money into their bank accounts when they have more than they need. It explains why the famous just can't get famous enough. "It makes you desire what you don't yet have, and drives you to see new things," writes Daniel Lieberman and Michael Long in *The Molecule of More*. "It rewards you when you obey it, and makes you suffer when you don't."

Montagu discovered a molecule called 'dopamine' that, although rather insignificant in the human brain (only 0.0005 per cent of brain cells produce dopamine, or one in two million), exerted an undue influence on human behaviour. Today, the word 'dopamine' conjures up images of gamers hell bent on amassing rewards on their consoles, or social media users trying to get that elusive 'likes' number up. It evokes images of addicts – from drugs, to alcohol, to food.

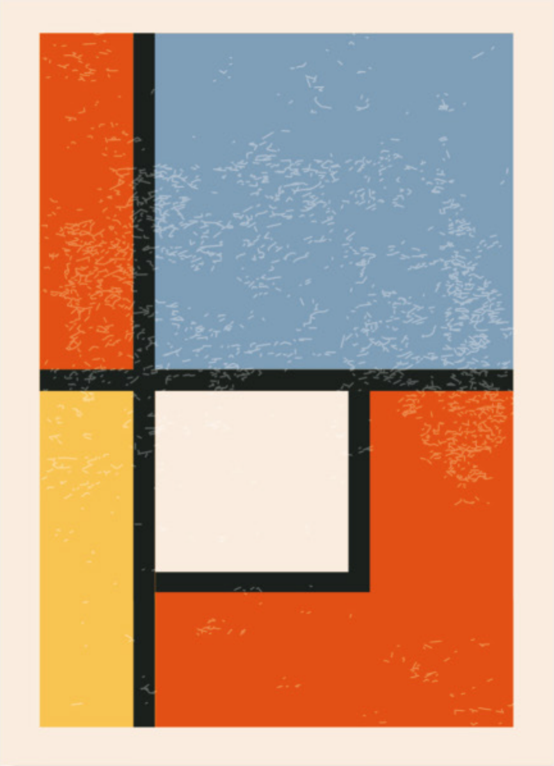
Dopamine is not pleasure, but rather it is a *forecaster* of pleasure. Dopamine spikes as we anticipate something exciting or pleasurable happening, and dips when the experience comes about. Dopamine happens in the lead up to something, and that's why it's critical for motivation. Rats depleted of dopamine in the laboratory don't work as hard to get food; they just couldn't be bothered compared to normal rats. Super-high dopaminergic people, on the other hand, are the types you meet who are forever planning – a new business, new scheme, new partner, new this, new that – never at rest, always seeking the next thing; living from one dopamine high to the next.

Today, many of us distract ourselves with quick dopamine hits, whether that's ruminating or worrying, entering the cyberworld, thinking about tomorrow, or planning next week, next year. Never in the moment, forever in the realm of possibility – the 'what if'. Always seeking that next hit.

Food for thought

"All the misfortunes of men arise from one thing only, that they are unable to stay quietly in their own room," wrote Blaise Pascal. The French philosopher could well have added to the end of his quote the words: "without consuming information". Pascal was referring to our aversion to being alone with our thoughts. He writes: "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things."

Already, by the 17th century, intellectuals were wary of the volume of information circulating in society, most notably due to the proliferation of books. French philosopher René Descartes was one such critic, writing: "Even if all knowledge could be found in books, where it is mixed in with so many useless things and confusingly heaped in such large volumes, it would take longer to read those books than we have to live in this life and more effort to select the useful things than to find them oneself."



Today, the information explosion knows no bounds. "In 2011, Americans took in five times as much information every day as they did in 1986 – the equivalent of 174 newspapers," writes Daniel Levitin in *The Organised Mind*. "During our leisure time," he continues, "not counting work, each of us processes 34 gigabytes, or 100,000 words every day."

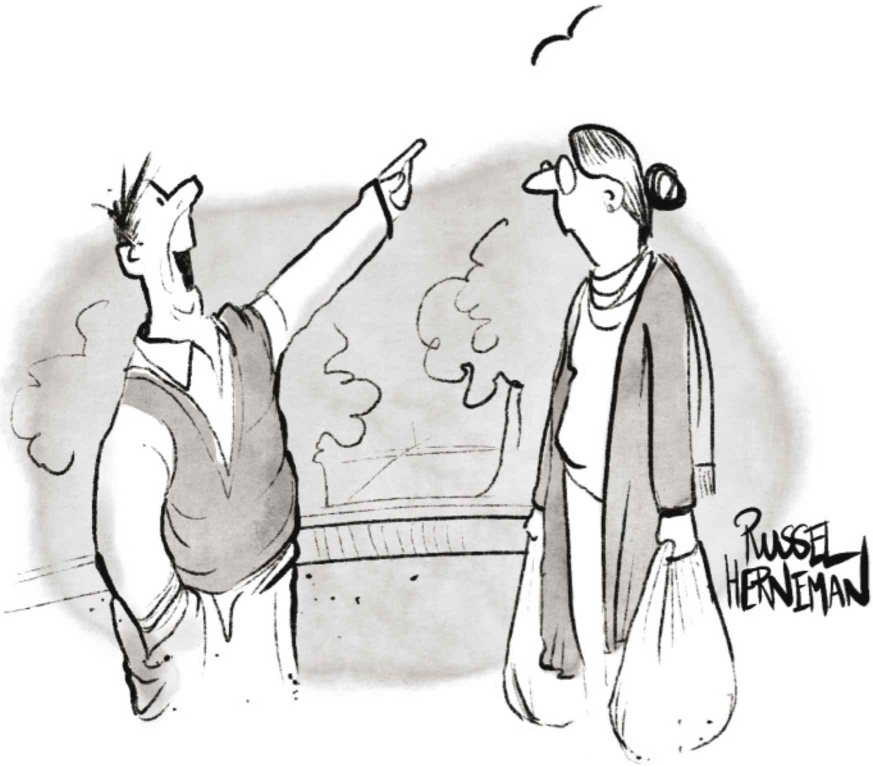
One reason why information has exploded in the last 500 years is that humans keep seeking more and more of it. Information is a bowl of sweets that we can't resist.

However the problem, according to scientists, is that information *is* like candy for the brain. A study at Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley shows that information triggers the brain's reward centre just like junk food, on par with money and drugs. When we're feverishly scanning our news feed for a particularly good or bad news story, it's as though we're prising open the ice cream container and diving in. In the study, associate professor Ming Hsu discovered that the brain converts curiosity about information into the same common code it uses for money and other concrete rewards.

Today, we can tailor our search according to whatever piques our curiosity the most – musicians, sports stars, finance, or global politics. Whatever it is that we're really curious about, we can search, follow, like, pin, and consume more of it. We enter what's termed the 'curiosity state', and when interesting facts roll in, we get rewarded with a flood of dopamine to the brain.

The trouble for the human brain is that we have limited processing capabilities. To understand one person speaking to us, writes Levitin, we need to process 60 bits of information per second. For us to understand two people talking at the same time requires 120 bits per second, which puts us at the upper end of our processing capacity. We can only properly focus on one thing at a time, which explains why we often get frustrated when someone speaks to us, for example, while we are writing an email or following our GPS in the car. "Every status update you read on Facebook, every tweet or text message you get from a friend, is competing for resources in your brain with important things like whether to put your savings in stocks or bonds, where you left your passport, or how best to reconcile with a close friend you just had an argument with," adds Levitin.

When we continue to allocate more of our attentional resources to consuming information, we don't have much left at our disposal for much else.



"I suffer from a short atten... oh, look, a bird!"

"Who can say they understand distraction? The English word calls up several images: a mathematics of division; a morality of bad choices; a movement of dispersion across a grid of more and more disparate points; a diminishment of strength, quality, or purity; vices or quasi-vices that produce pleasure without work: amusement, diversion, entertainment. All these are practiced by notorious figures, by sidetracked workers, bored students, and dissolute citizens, by the daydreamer, the sleeper who doesn't dream, the absentminded one. At the farthest limit, the least collected, the least 'with it,' lie the dead, who are permanently elsewhere. Which one or more of these do we mean when we say distraction?"

– **Paul North**, *The Problem of Distraction*

The age of attention

To progress, wrote Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana, you first need to 'know yourself', or understand what it is exactly that you want out of your life, and, furthermore, how you hope to achieve it. But of course, this scenario will play out within a world of near-bursting inboxes, traffic jams, twitter storms, and the end-of-season soccer finals. Our self-development will happen amid department store clearance sales, movie nights, and the pings of instant messages. In other words, our efforts at self-realisation will happen within the context of distraction. "It occurred to me," wrote Santayana, "that a more honest criticism of progress might be based on tracing the distracted efforts of man to satisfy his natural impulses in the environment." To know oneself, surmised Santayana, one must know how one is distracted.

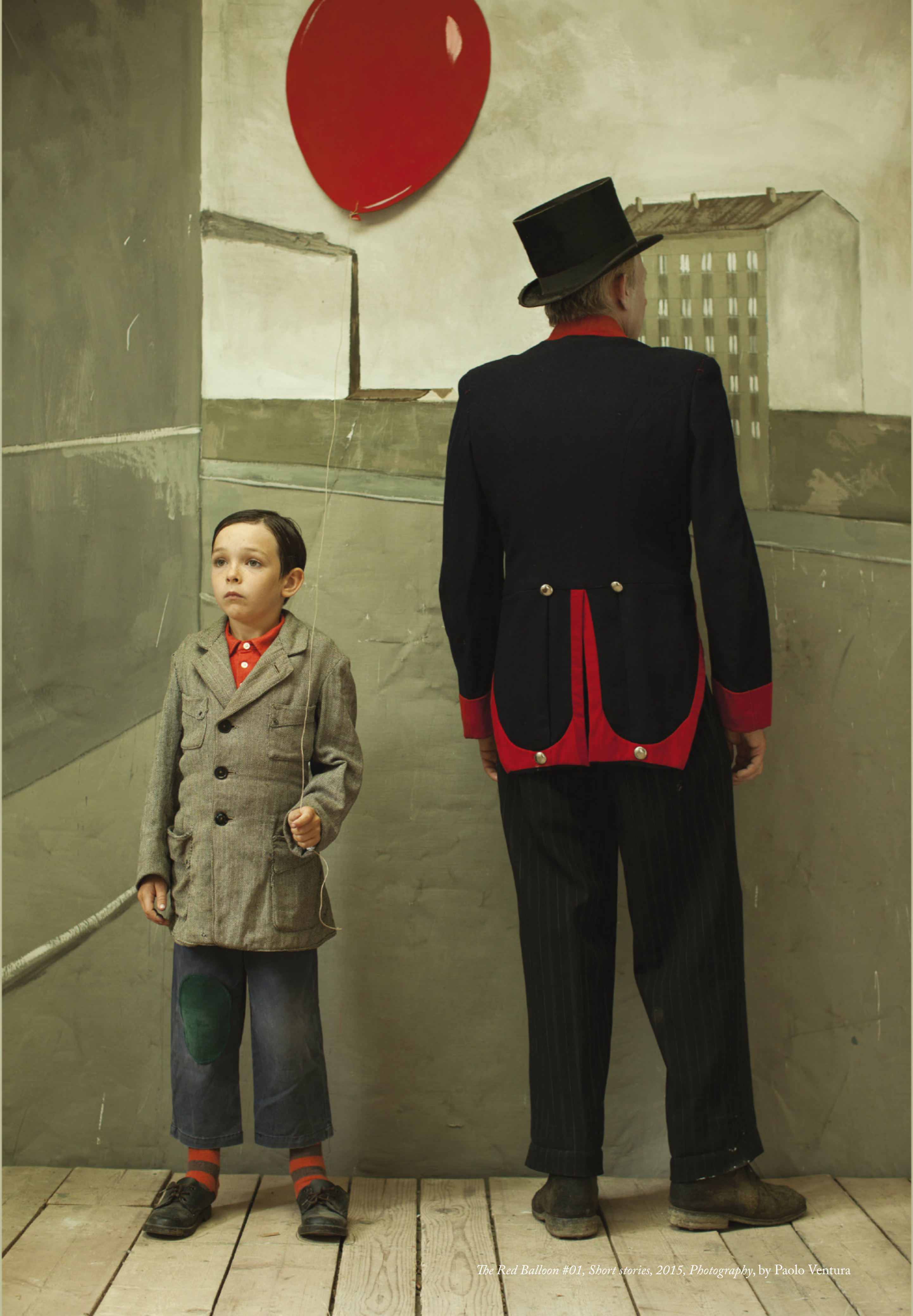
Distraction, by definition, is what prevents us from concentrating on something else. It's what gets in the way of us attending to what we really want in life – that is, to fulfil our goals. What you do in your life will depend on your impulses or desires, as well as your ability to reason and reflect upon them. But distraction, or the "alien force that drags the spirit away from the spontaneous exercise of its liberty", as Santayana describes it, can get in the way of all this. It can drown out your reason, or that intelligent voice in your head that clarifies your "living interests" and guides your actions. It can stifle reflection, which ordinarily enables you to critique and evaluate your behaviour. And in today's technological age of impulse-pinging machines (websites, apps, game consoles) – programmed to elicit strong unreflective urges to message, read, listen, watch, game, call, click, view, like, follow, pin, search, post, tweet – our own impulses can get thwarted by technology's will to power.

But what, we must ask, does technology want for itself? Not for us, but for itself? The devices most omnipresent in our lives today share very similar goals – and these include high scores on such metrics as number of views, time on site, number of clicks, and total conversions. Technological devices want Billy, age 8, from Dover Heights, and Stefan, age 42, from Burleigh Heads, to use them more often, and for longer and longer periods of time. They want to shift Billy's natural impulse, or instinctual urge to pursue his own goals – whatever they be, from running to riding his bike with his sister – towards their own goals of time on site and number of clicks. Technology, using psychological tools of persuasion, designs the user it needs.

James Williams, a former Google strategist, who quit working in technology to study at Oxford University, writes in *Stand Out of Our Light*: "I soon came to understand that the cause in which I'd been conscripted wasn't the organisation of information at all, but of attention." Although we call our time the Information Age, a better name for it, he argues, is the Age of Attention. "As the noted economist Herbert Simon pointed out in the 1970s, when information becomes abundant, attention becomes the scarce resource."

Williams continues: "For too long, we've minimised the threats of this intelligent, adversarial persuasion as mere 'distraction', or minor annoyance. In the short term, these challenges can indeed frustrate our ability to do the things we want to do. In the longer term, however, they can make it harder for us to live the lives we want to live, or, even worse, undermine fundamental capacities such as reflection and self-regulation, making it harder, in the words of philosopher Harry Frankfurt, to 'want what we want to want.' Seen in this light, these new attentional adversaries threaten not only the success but even the integrity of the human will, at both individual and collective levels."

> "You don't want your life to be spent wasted on the equivalent of doing sudokus."
>
> – Professor Susan Wolf



The Red Balloon #01, Short stories, 2015, Photography, by Paolo Ventura

BRAIN CHATTER

Much of our life whizzes by without us even noticing, so much so that various studies estimate that about 47 per cent of our waking time our minds are elsewhere – wandering. This distracted state of mind not only consumes a great deal of energy, but incessant brain chatter about the past or future can distract us from the immediacy of the moment.

When we are not focused on the outside world, but are, instead, caught up in endless self-chatter and mind wandering, a network of interacting brain regions, known as the default mode network (DMN), is activated. This large-scale network is, according to neuroscientist Moshe Bar, making constant associations to help us make our way in the world, including thinking about ourselves and others, reliving the past, and worrying about the future.

"This is, essentially, why so much of the DMN's mind wandering activity is concerned with thinking about the past and the future, taking us away from the now," notes Moshe in his book *Mindwandering*. "We're searching memory for associations to help us interpret what's happening in our lives and what might be coming. We're intently making all manner of predictions." But the problem with the DMN is that endless associative thinking can be the cause of many problematic behaviours, such as spiralling worry and depression.

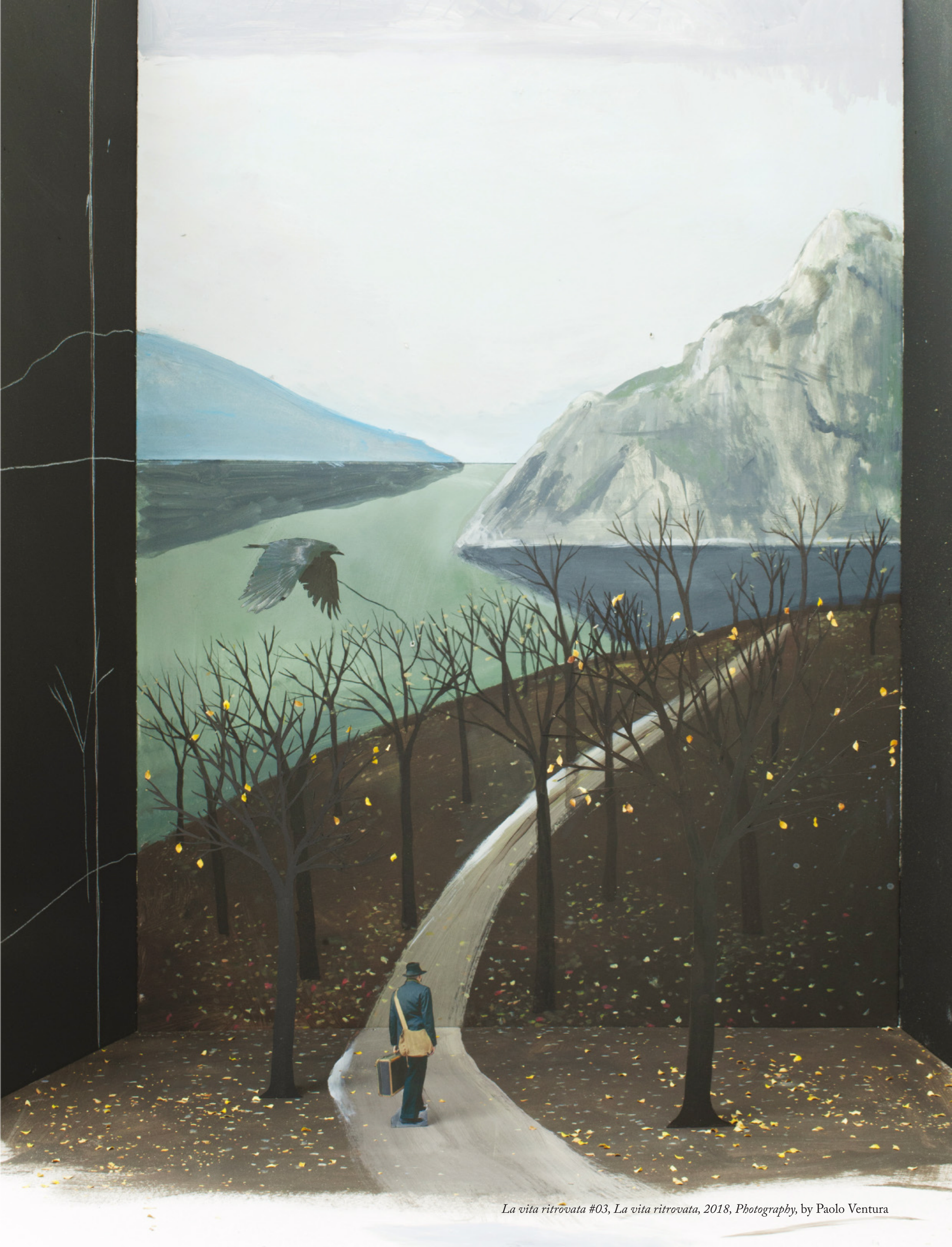
While meditation is a proven way to reduce activity in the DMN, not all mind wandering is bad for us. It's not recommended that we blanket out our thoughts all of the time; in fact, sometimes, particularly when we're in a good mood – and our mind wandering is broad, open, and 'exploratory' – mind wandering is proven to stoke creativity, enhance learning, and can gift us many clever ideas for successfully navigating our future. Even better, it makes us happy. At the other end of the continuum – what Moshe calls "exploitative" mind wandering – is the narrowly focused, task-driven mind wandering, that helps us get that work presentation done in record time. Both are essential for us, but it's helpful to have a sense of which state we are in. "There is certainly no magical formula for gaining control over our mental state, but I have found that by being aware of the need to try to calibrate my state of mind on this exploratory/exploitatory continuum for the situation I'm in, I'm increasingly able to do so," writes Moshe.

RUSSEL HERNEMAN

"Sorry, what was that? My mind wandered."

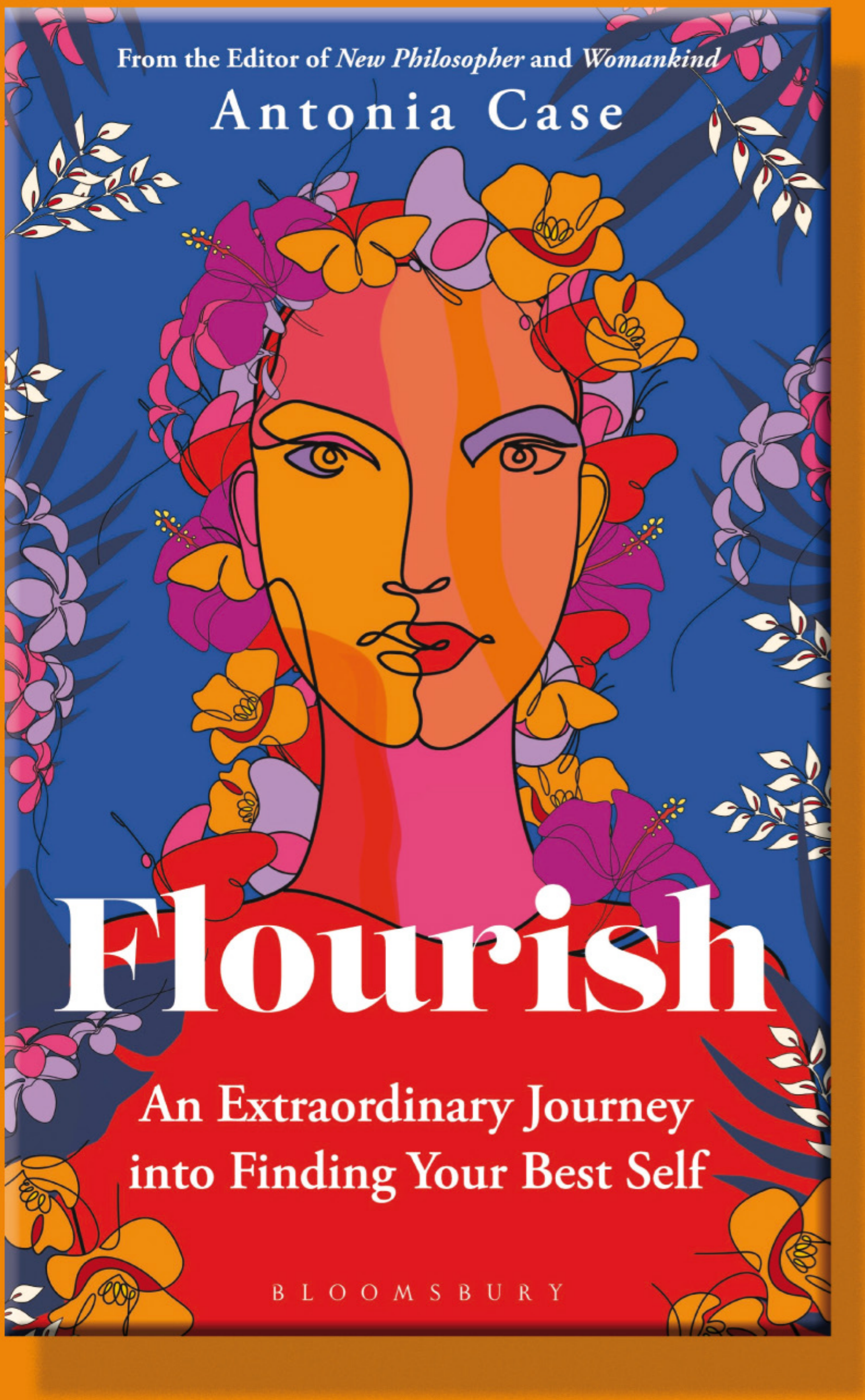
"In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

– Herbert Simon, *American economist, political scientist, and computer scientist*



La vita ritrovata #03, La vita ritrovata, 2018, Photography, by Paolo Ventura

Flourish, a new book by Antonia Case, the Editor of *New Philosopher* magazine, will be published in April 2023 by Bloomsbury.


From the Editor of *New Philosopher* and *Womankind*
Antonia Case
Flourish
An Extraordinary Journey into Finding Your Best Self
BLOOMSBURY

Flourish: An Extraordinary Journey into Finding Your Best Self

Is the possibility of becoming your 'ideal self' just wishful thinking? One woman decided to find out, and takes us on a spellbinding journey into the world of becoming yourself. What is a meaningful life? What does it mean to flourish? Antonia Case, prior to co-founding *New Philosopher* and *Womankind* magazines, quit her corporate job in the city and travelled across the world in search of meaning. In a quest to find answers, she turned off the soundtrack of the media, rid herself of technology, and with little more than books as carry-on luggage, she journeyed from Buenos Aires to Paris, from Barcelona to Byron Bay, seeking guidance from ancient philosophers and modern-day psychologists on what makes a good life, and what makes a life worth living. Along the way she discovers why winning the lottery doesn't make you happy, why making is better than having, and how love and belonging are vital to your sense of self.

Packed with insight into life's big questions, *Flourish* will take you on a riveting journey in search of what matters most.

Praise for Flourish

"Every now and then an epiphany comes along in the form of a book. Are we being who we secretly thought we could be? Is life being the adventure it promised? *Flourish* is a road trip, an odyssey and a quest in the company of thinkers, not by a guru but by someone who with gleeful bravery walked out of the office and went to find their freedom. The time is right for this kind of quest, the time is right for these philosophies - and I found it right for the sweet kick in the backside this book gave me."

DBC Pierre, author of *Vernon God Little*, winner of The Booker Prize

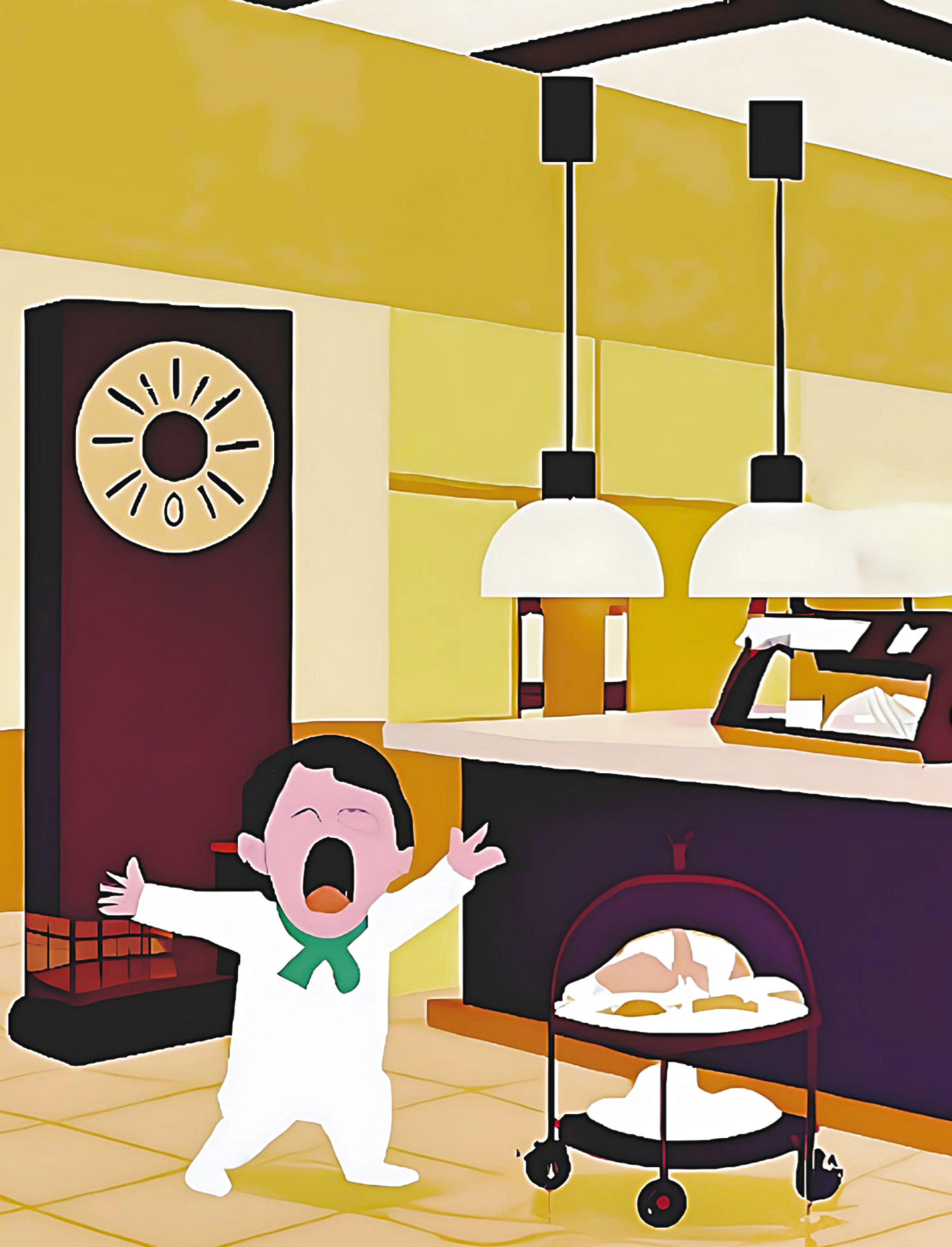
"Radiant and wise, *Flourish* is a book for our times, showing us all the way to live a rich and purposeful life."

Kate Forsyth, bestselling author of *Bitter Greens* and over 40 books, winner of the American Library Association (ALA) Award for Best Historical Fiction

"What's so brilliant and fresh: the big, best ideas of world philosophy beautifully explained, yes; but via the close-up story of Antonia's adventurous and fascinating (and very real) life. It's what I need: not apology or gloom but an authentic, inspiring appetite for getting our complicated, imperfect - and sometimes wonderful - lives to flower. You want to reach for your journal, get brave and join her."

John Armstrong, philosopher and author of *Life Lessons from Nietzsche* and *Art as Therapy*

Pre-order your copy of *Flourish* from your local bookstore, via leading online retailers, or via bloomsbury.com/au/flourish-9781472979704/



by Antonia Case

Being well distracted

At the tail end of breakfast at a hotel in Lourdes, France, a man enters the room accompanied by a cacophony of glass-shattering screams – dumping his manic toddler a metre from my table before heading over to the cereal bar.

The toddler is in the throes of the biggest tantrum of his young life. His mouth is agape and his eyes are red wild. As his ribs contract for another round, I desperately grab two forks and march them like soldiers across my breakfast table. The toddler stops, stares, and is, almost magically, silenced.

Fairly early on, most parents learn that distraction is their friend. When a child is in the throes of despair, much solace can be gained by shifting the child's attention to whatever nonsensical or irrelevant item can be found in the periphery of the child's world, such as marching cutlery. In other words, distraction – or shifting attention away from one's own emotions and thoughts – can have powerfully positive effects.

So, why is distraction regarded so negatively in adulthood? Why is distraction often thought of as the enemy of the 21st century? We are distracting ourselves to death, it's said. We are distracted not only by our technological devices, and flickering screens, but we are distracting each other with our incessant texting, liking, following, and unfollowing, rarely leaving each other a moment's respite in our own world.

As early as the 18th century, philosophers were drawing attention to the perils of inattention. In his *An Essay on Truth*, published in 1770, Scottish moral philosopher James Beattie wrote about the "evil habits of inattention", which can spark unkindness and dissatisfaction. "If, therefore, we wish to have a due regard for others, or for ourselves, let us endeavour to acquire a habit of strict attention at all times, and in all circumstances; of attention, I mean, to that, whatever it is, in which we happen to be engaged." While Beattie admitted to mind wandering at times – when eating alone, for instance, or putting on clothes, or playing an easy tune on a musical instrument, he warned: "this we ought not to do often, lest we contract a habit of doing it". Indeed, he warned that a "habit of inattention", or diversion to trivial things, can "come to affect our behaviour in things of the moment".

The 'distracted' person, or the one who has acquired "the habit of ruminating upon a few things and overlooking others" is typically, Beattie describes, a dull-eyed, dull-witted fellow, who surveys the world with confusion as though suddenly raised from a deep sleep. "If you ask him a question, it is some time before he can recollect himself so far as to attend to you; he hesitates, and you must repeat your words before he understands them."

On the contrary, the advantages of habitual attention are manifold, stressed the philosopher. "Clearness of understanding, extensive knowledge, and exact memory, are its natural consequences. It is even beneficial to health, by varying the succession of our ideas and sensations; and it gives us the command of our thoughts, and enables us at all times to act readily, and with presence of mind."

Beattie here, it seems, is speaking about on the ailments of a distracted mind – one that repeatedly obsesses over trivial matters, such as invented worries and problems, triggered by emotions such as fear and anger. By taking command of our thoughts, he rightly acknowledges, we can engage more fully with the world around us.

The wailing child at the hotel breakfast room is evidently upset – tired, hungry, angry about something or other. But the child was unable to break free from that pattern of behaviour, not until the marching forks appeared in its line of sight. As we grow into adults, we too learn to deal with negative emotions, mostly by distracting ourselves. When we feel lonely, bored, upset, or plagued by any number of unpleasant emotions, our handy little distraction boxes – smartphones, computers, and television sets – offer us an infinite variety of pictures and squiggly text. They become as essential to our peace of mind as marching forks. We check the news, the weather, our emails, we scroll past pictures of friends eating pies, and we promptly forget about the thought that prompted the feeling of agitation or worry in the first place.

Indeed, by logging on, we distract ourselves from our own thoughts, and set our minds upon a new stimulus. We distract ourselves with distraction, as it were. This works, so far as it redirects thought, but, more often than not, it shifts our attention towards further things to worry about – war, social media trolls, and vexing emails, to name a few.

Learning to take command of our thoughts is essential for living a good life.

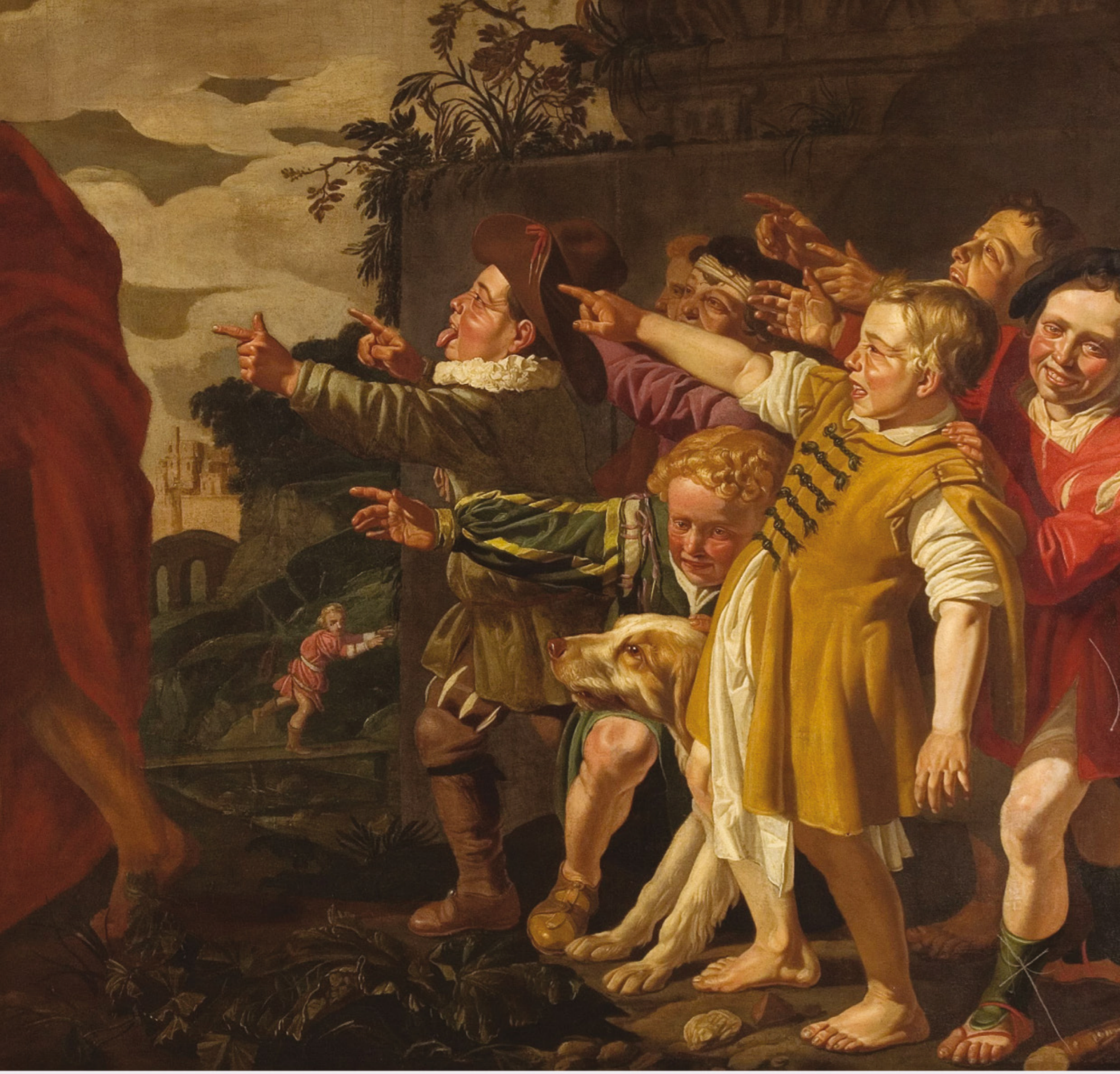
Although most will be utterly unaware of this, our obsession with reading the news, or our emails, or checking the weather, is underpinned by unpleasant emotions. And most of this is happening in our subconscious, below the radar of our awareness. A tensing of our shoulders, a slight uptick in our heart rate or body temperature, and we're logging on – checking our apps, sending emojis across cyberspace.

If you've ever done a walking meditation – and I urge you to do so (ironically, you can access courses freely online), you move through the paces of attention. Firstly, you focus attention on the muscles of your feet as you walk, your calf muscles gripping and releasing; you focus attention on what you see, what you hear, the feeling of the cold air circling your neck, what you smell and touch. You activate four of your senses, and after a while you start to move seamlessly between them. Like a pent-up dog that's been taken out for a much-needed walk, your mind starts to unravel – and eventually a sweet essence, like sunlight, replaces the dark and agitated murkiness of the mind.

During walking meditation, we deliberately distract ourselves with the immediate environment, and our place within it. A petal shifts in the wind, and we stare intently at it. A dog barks and we pick up our ears. We deliberately touch the paling of a fence to feel its interlocked grain. Just like the child at the hotel, we use the distraction of our immediate world, and the distraction of our body moving through space, to settle, calm, and centre us.

Distraction per se isn't the problem here, rather it is whether the distraction is a help or a hindrance. Are we being distracted by the muted sounds of electronic messages coming from our smartphone or computer, or are we being distracted by the immediacy of our world, the sounds, sensations, and the people we meet?

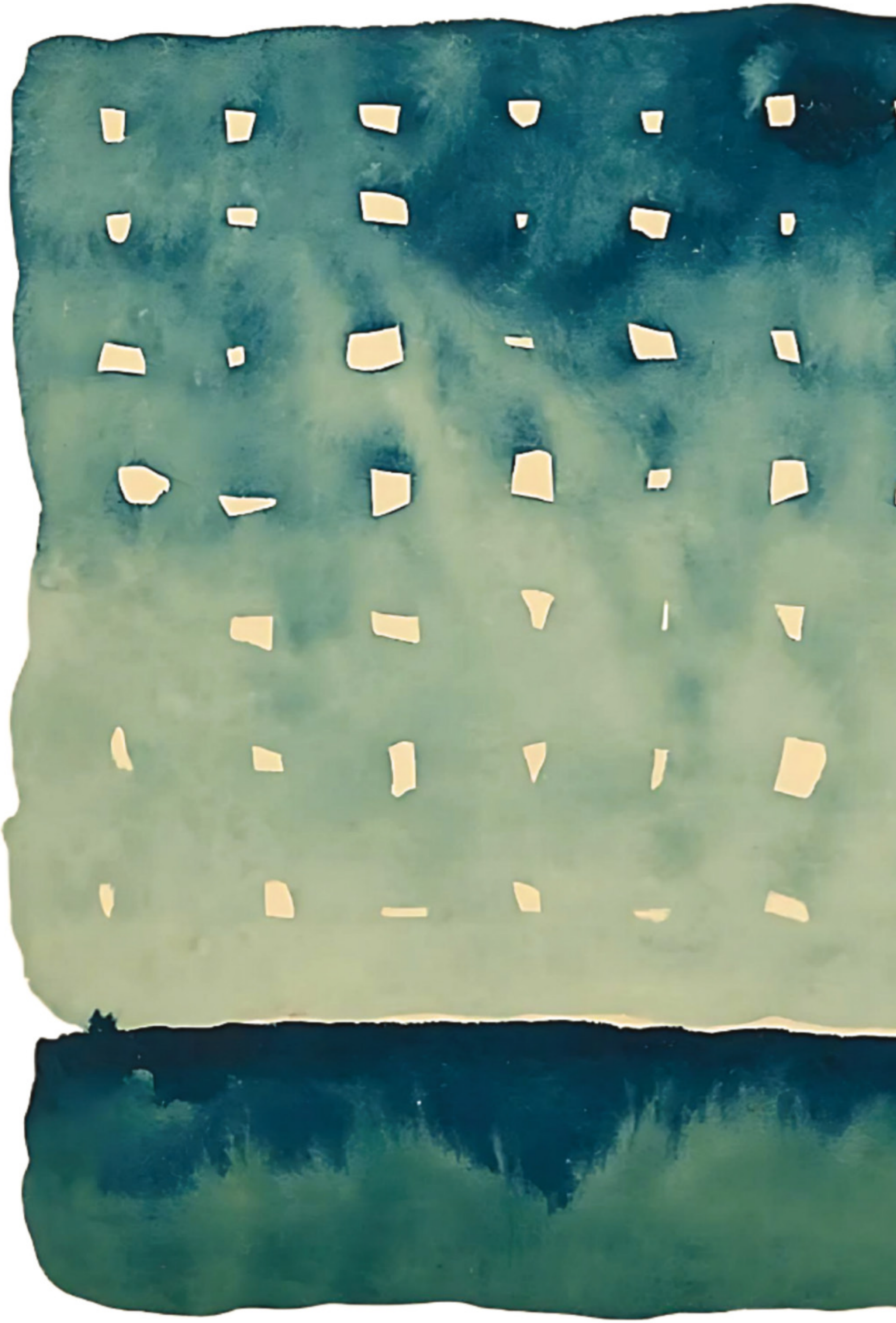
Our minds, like screaming toddlers, are unruly. They can be chaotic and negative. Learning to take command of your thoughts is essential for living a good life; and distraction, funnily enough, is sometimes the answer. You need to distract yourself, but you need to learn to distract yourself with the things that matter – the things you love, that you're proud of, that make your life worth living. ◘

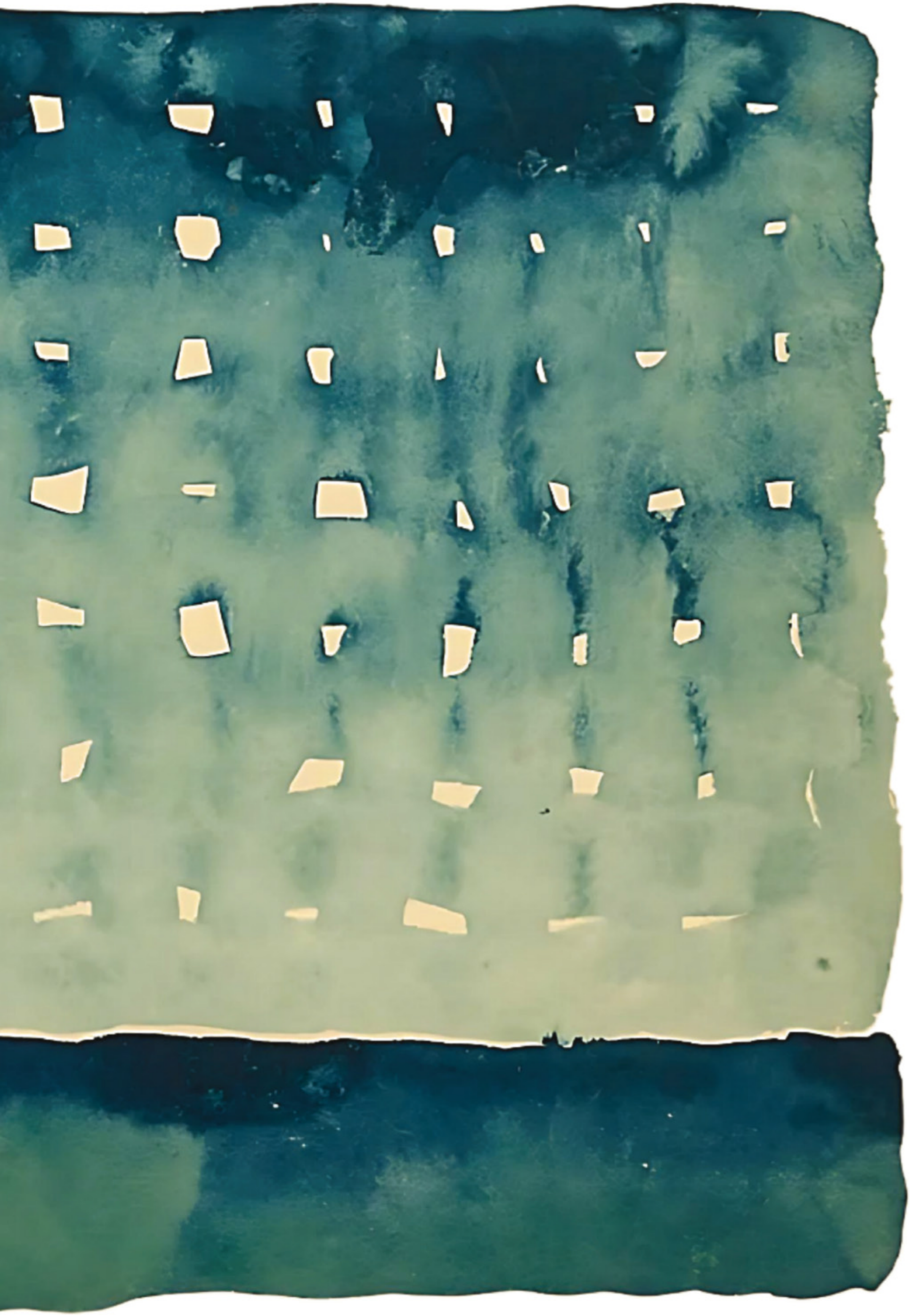


“No man is in any degree fit for either business or conversation, who does not command his attention to the present object, be it what it will.”

Lord Chesterfield

Elisha Mocked by the Little Children, Roeloff van Zijl, c. 1625-1630





Starry Night, 1917, Georgia O'Keefe

by Patrick Stokes

Mental decluttering

Despite his short life, the nineteenth century American author Henry David Thoreau has become an enduring symbol of not one, but two popular tropes. Through his much-loved book *Walden*, an account of his two years living in a hut he built by the side of Walden Pond in Massachusetts, Thoreau has become an emblem of a certain kind of rugged self-reliance. He's a perennial hero to those wanting to stand apart from society and return to a simpler, less crowded and complicated life. Equally, by going to jail for refusing to pay a tax that would fund an unjust war, for reasons laid out with aphoristic flair in his essay 'Civil Disobedience', Thoreau has become a figure of moral courage, a staunch and principled resister of unjust state power and oppression.

Few historical figures can ever live up to the symbol they become, however, and Thoreau's story looks better if you don't look too closely at the details. The Walden Pond cabin was so close to town that Thoreau's mother and sisters still did his washing and brought him cakes. He did go to jail – for one night, before being released in the morning (someone had paid the tax for him against his will) after being served a pint of chocolate and brown bread for breakfast. Among his neighbours, Thoreau's reputation seems to have been more that of an eccentric contrarian. Many of the stories recounted about him no doubt contain an element of folklore, but they do paint a picture of a man of considerable, if not always likeable, intensity.

One particular story has a farmer on his way to work one morning walking past Thoreau staring intently at a pond, and then coming home that night to see Thoreau still standing in the same spot, still staring, engrossed in the pond's little world.

Whether true or not, the story is very much in keeping with Thoreau's passion for observation. His journals and books are replete with almost obsessively detailed accounts of the natural world. This does not always seem to have been a comfortable way to live, however. In a journal entry from September 1852, Thoreau writes that "I have the habit of attention to such excess that my senses get no rest, but suffer from a constant strain." For someone constituted like Thoreau, a simple walk in the woods, or casual peek into a pond, becomes a gruelling exercise in active attention.

Thoreau thinks the solution, however, is not to tune out the world around him, but to learn to pay attention in a different way. His problem is that he is looking, when what is really needed is to see; "the more you look the less you will observe". If you really want to observe, "Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object; let it come to you." Thoreau has often found himself consciously trying to redirect his attention

from one object to the next, but this is precisely the wrong thing to do: "What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye."

But what, then, is the difference between looking and seeing? The distinction is familiar enough from everyday language ("You've misplaced your coat? Well I didn't see it when I was in the living room, but then I wasn't looking for it"), but while both looking and seeing are something we do, looking is somehow active, whereas seeing contains an element of passivity. When we see something, it is almost as if the thing itself imposes itself upon us. Think of one of those 'reversible' images like the infamous duck-rabbit illusion, where you can see the picture as either one thing or another. Imagine you're looking at the duck-rabbit for the first time, and so far you can only see the duck. How do you go about seeing the rabbit? You can't simply make the rabbit visible by sheer will. Rather, you have to somehow let the rabbit appear to you, a process that's not exactly under your control. To look is to choose to direct your gaze, but to see is to somehow be impressed upon from without. If there's an action involved, it's in 'detaching' from the duck so that the rabbit can arise.

What Thoreau is painfully aware of here is that the act of looking, far from facilitating seeing, can instead get in the way. Effortful looking – 'going to the object,' scrutinising it intently – can actually stop it from coming to you. While it makes sense to try to shut out distractions, if we try to focus on something we can become more absorbed in the attempt to look than in what we are looking at. The curious paradox of trying to pay attention is that we attend best when we don't try, instead maintaining a sort of receptivity to the world. We have to somehow let the world in, rather than trying to trap it with our gaze.

We can make this point clearer by considering another, much older story of an observer who ventures into the woods. In the third century BCE text that bears his name, the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi recounts the story of Qing, a woodworker who carves a bell stand so hauntingly exquisite that people said it must be the work of spirits. The Marquis of Lu admiringly asks Qing about his art or technique; Qing replies, rather coyly, that he is a humble

RUSSEL HERNEMAN

"What's the emoji for crashing the car while texting?"

Sometimes, at least, to focus is less about paying attention and more about letting go.

servant – what art could he possibly have? But, he admits, he does have a process: “I always fast in order to still my mind.” After three days of fasting, he no longer thinks about money or fame. After five days, he no longer has any thoughts of praise or blame, nor of skill or clumsiness. A full week into his fast, Qing has forgotten the ruler, the court, and even his own body. “After that, I go into the mountain forest and examine the Heavenly nature of the trees. If I find one of superlative form, and I can see a bell stand there, I put my hand to the job of carving; if not, I let it go.”

Qing’s story, along with the other ‘knack’ stories in the Zhuangzi, exemplify the notion of *wu-wei*, ‘non-action’ or ‘acting without acting,’ a form of effortless or spontaneous behaviour that is a major theme in Classical Chinese thought. Here, *wu-wei* interacts with the Daoist concept of *ziran*, things being what they are of themselves: the bell stand is already there in the tree, as its inherent nature. Qing must quiet any thoughts that might get in the way of it emerging, thereby becoming a frictionless conduit for the bell stand to self-actualise. Ruminating about technique or reward will frustrate and impede a process that must be allowed to simply happen on its own terms.

Qing does not go out into the world and force his own projects onto the products of nature. He does not allow his engagement with the natural world to be distracted by ulterior motives such as money and praise. Rather, he ‘becomes nothing’ until things that are simply already there in the wood offer themselves up to him. To see things as they are requires not an effort to look, but a sort of clearing-away of all the mental clutter that will prevent things coming through to us clearly.

That sort of mental de-cluttering seems to be precisely what Thoreau longs for in his journal entry. Instead of a strenuous observer, he wants to be a receptive saunterer, someone who lets the things of the world simply come to his consciousness the way angelic bell stands come to Qing. Only a stilled mind provides the openness into which things can appear as they are, undistorted by our projects and ambitions. Sometimes, at least, to focus is less about paying attention and more about letting go.

“A multitude of books distracts the mind.”
— Seneca

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“The objective of all human arrangements is through distracting one’s thoughts to cease to be aware of life.”
Friedrich Nietzsche

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“There are too many distractions in this life for quality of thought; and it’s quality of thought, not quantity, that counts.”
Nikola Tesla

“I never knew any man cured of inattention.”
Jonathan Swift

"You can't depend on your judgement when your imagination is out of focus."
Mark Twain

"It is a way of calling a man a fool when no attention is given to what he says."
Roger L'Estrange

"Lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold."
William Shakespeare

"Happy is he who can cast away every cause of distraction."
Thomas à Kempis

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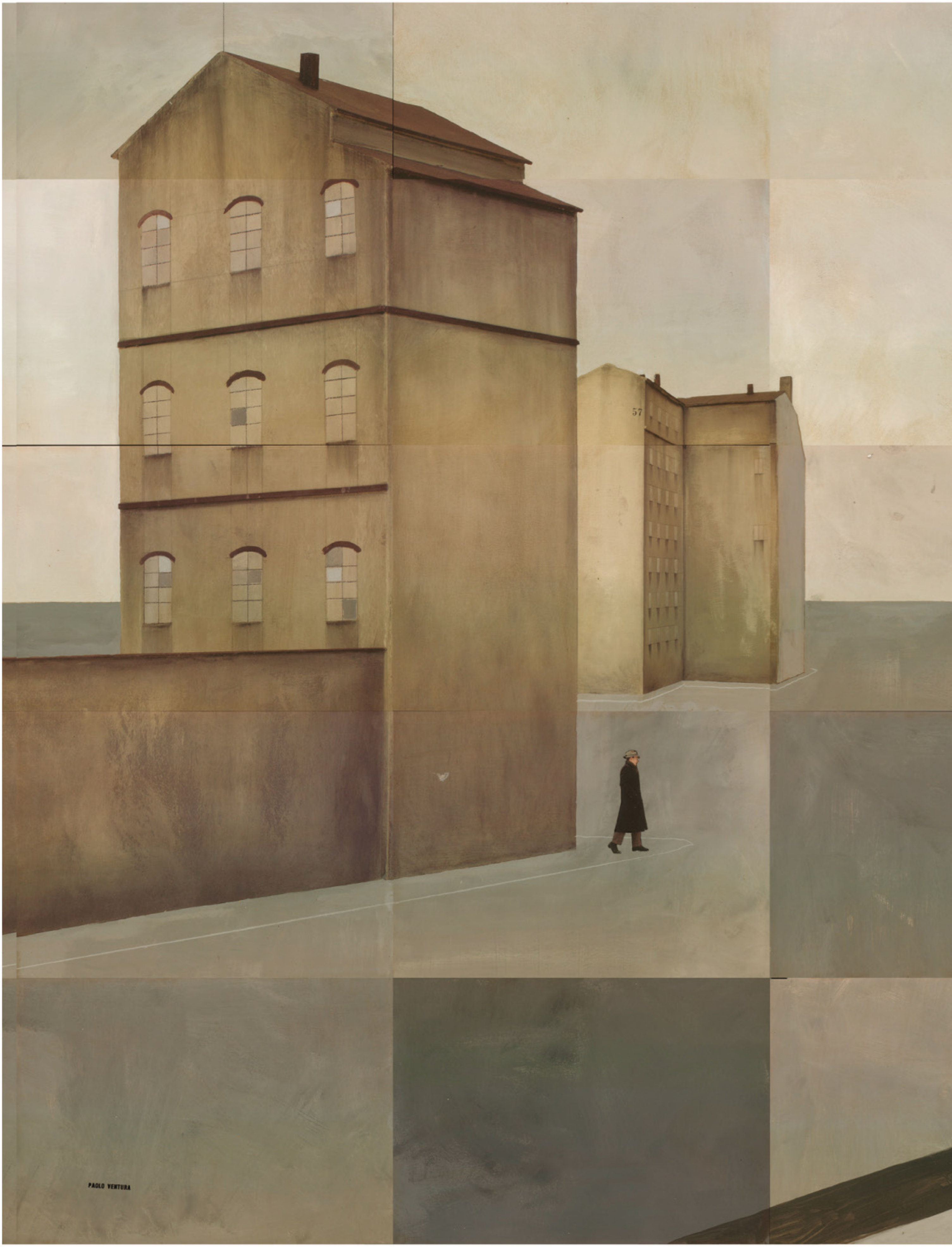
"A person having a distracted mind is set between the fangs of disturbing emotions."
Shantideva

"It is difficult to instruct children because of their natural inattention; the true mode, of course, is to first make our modes interesting to them."
John Locke

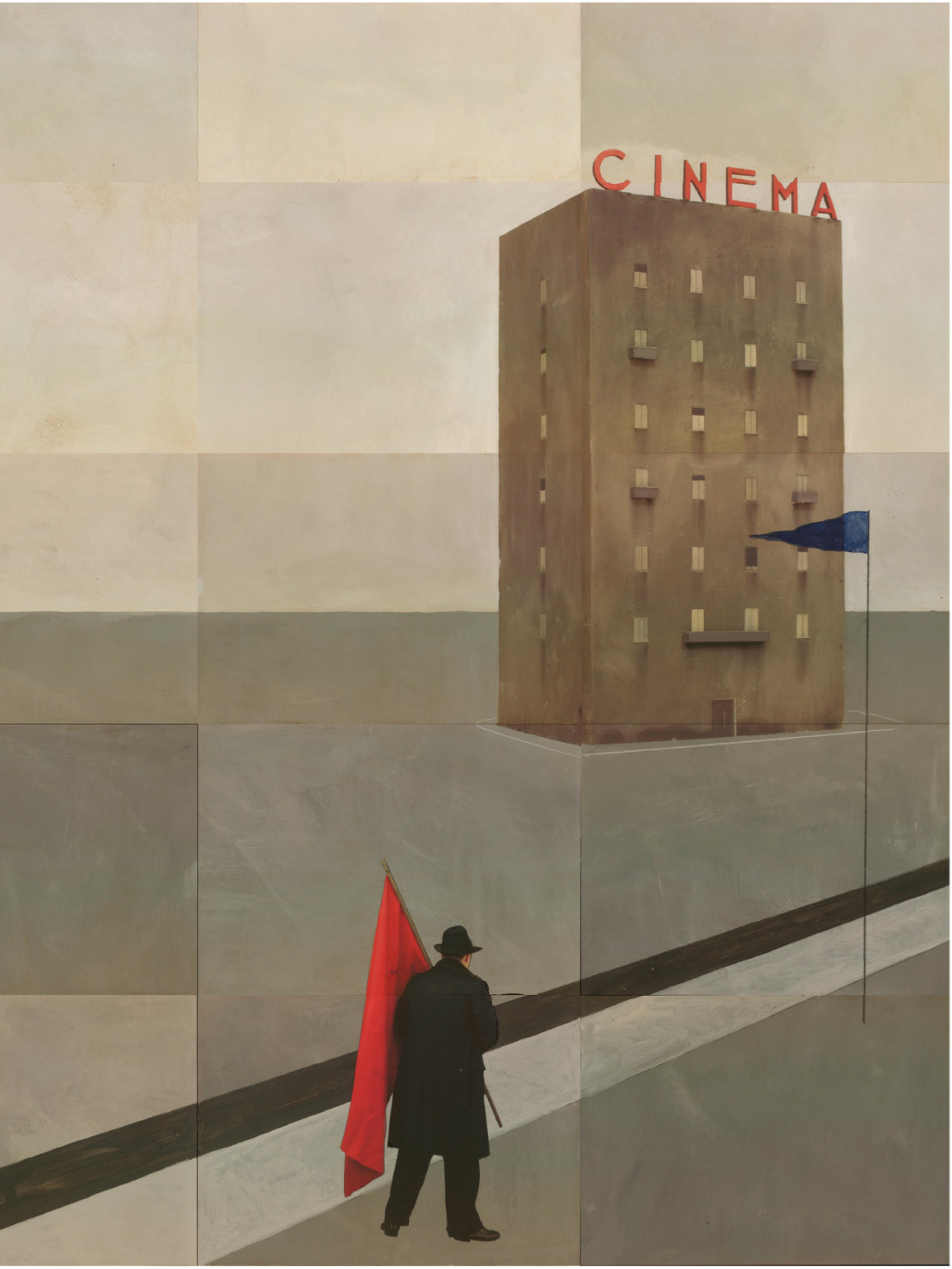
"A small sorrow distracts us, a great one makes us collected."
Jean Paul

"Attention is the stuff that memory is made of, and memory is accumulated genius."
James Russell Lowell

"Attention is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought."
William James



PAOLO VENTURA



Anarchico A2, by Paolo Ventura

by DBC Pierre

The Trojan horse and the concierge

It was a mild day in September 1899 when Dr David Orr Edson, son of former New York City mayor Franklin Edson, approached the corner of West 74th Street and Central Park West in an electric taxicab. As a southbound trolley car met the cab, sixty-nine-year-old real estate dealer Henry H. Bliss alighted, turning briefly to help a companion climb onto the street. In that moment, the taxicab hit the gentleman and ran him over, causing injuries from which he could not recover. Mr Bliss is remembered in a plaque on that corner as the first motor vehicle fatality in the history of the United States.

On another mild evening 119 years later, in March 2018, a self-driving test vehicle travelled north in autonomous mode along Mill Avenue in Tempe, Arizona. The car was fitted with radar and LiDAR, but neither these nor a human backup driver were able to identify and avoid the figure of forty-nine-year-old Elaine Herzberg, who pushed a bicycle laden with shopping into the lane ahead. She became the first pedestrian fatality in history caused by an autonomous vehicle.

These grim milestones bear witness to human frailty and machine frailty. They're here as bookends for this observation: look at our drive across that time not to offset but to abdicate fallibility. Designing machines like carbon sinks for frailty, and now the machines are also frail. That's fine as it's them, not us, says a cultural gale that found it easier to install machine intelligence in us than put our thinking into machines.

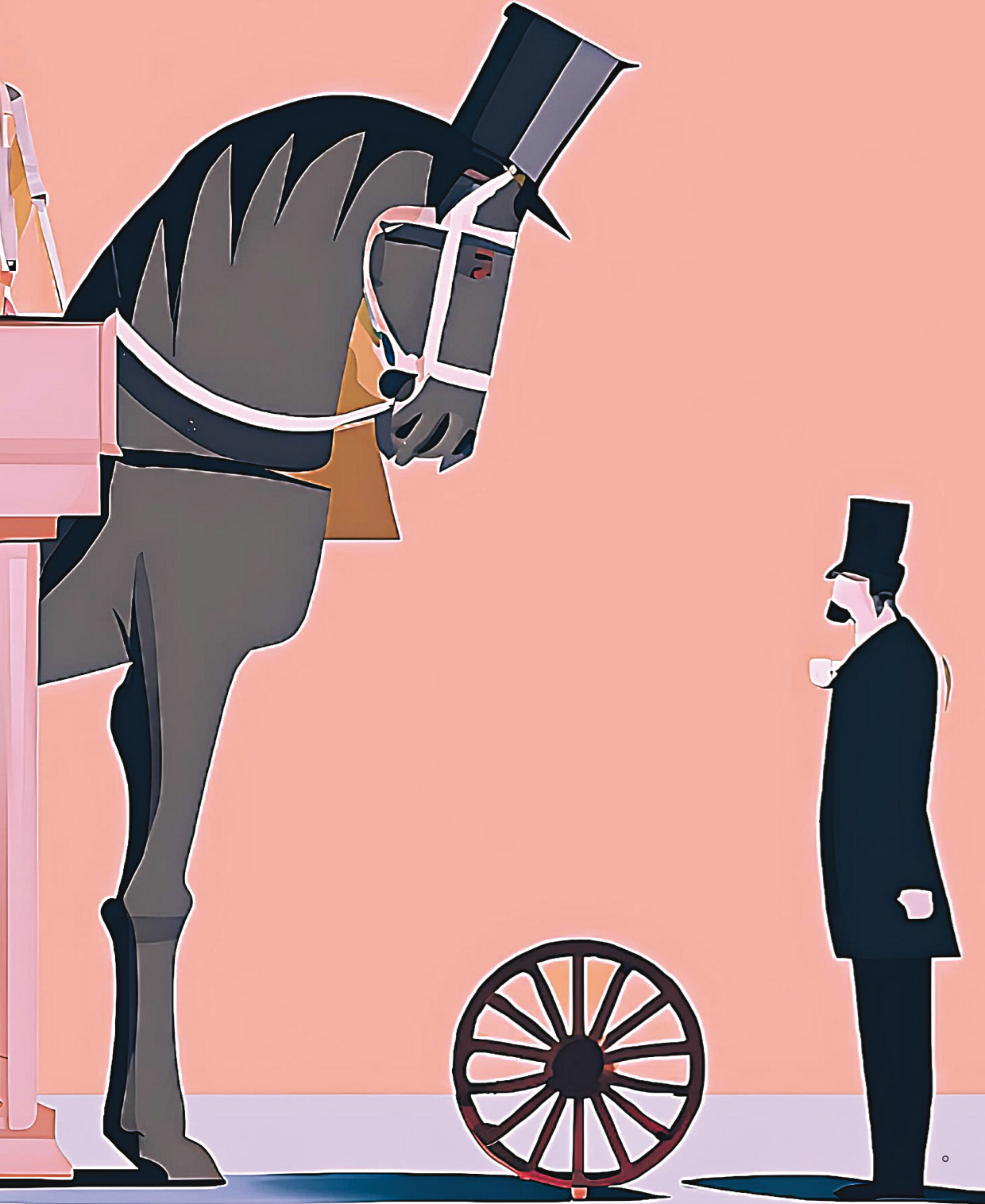
Surely there are questions for us between those accidents, about the shifting value of fallibility. Questions, if not a baby flying out with the bath water. Look at the word 'distraction'. Defined today by its opposites: purposefulness, efficiency, focus – qualities machines aspire to. Traction and distraction are common enough Latin words, but their implications, packed as words are with self-expanding ideas, can pick up stowaways over time, belying shifts in the cultures around them. Feel the modern weight of 'distraction', its overtone and agenda – as if it skipped 'stowaways' and went straight to 'Trojan horse'. Trace an arc from some of its 16th century meanings – 'mental confusion or bewilderment', 'violent mental disturbance', 'excitement simulating madness' – to its deceptively Bauhaus position today: the act of taking our attention off the main game. It's that game we should look at. After all, what is this main game from which our focus mustn't shift? Who subscribed us to it and its language?

It's the modern game of progress. Of the right thing.

And what is the right thing?

A-ha.

Words might refresh their ideas over time, but this word is also being



instrumentalised. It's expressing new pressures to conform. Among those pressures is to accept new arguments about what is and isn't distraction. The position is even replicating itself via embassies in other terms, such as FOMO – Fear Of Missing Out – which warns of desolate conditions outside the perimeter fences of distraction. In this way the age of 'constant partial attention' may even be killing a damn good word, if paying attention to distraction, and fearing its loss, end up passing for focus.

It doesn't matter which polar tribe we're in, the twenty-four-seven brain-feed gang or the one that cries weapons of mass distraction; it doesn't matter whether we call the digital industrial condition the main game or the distraction – since the word toggles back to the question: if it's a diversion from good – what is good? Those antagonistic poles give it the voltage of a dying star, and it doesn't help existentially that the choice is so bipolar. We spend endless angst either tuning ourselves to keep up with 'the game', or failing to tune and vaguely fretting about it. Only the can-do gurus in the market are as tuned as the can-do gurus in the market. Moreover, it coincides with a time when counter-intuitive hacks are trending, coffee-break reversals in science giving a sense that up is down (turns out pizza beats avocado oil in a low-fat diet).

The modern issue of focus versus distraction is a micro-climate unto itself, one where values come pre-weighted: focus is sunshine, distraction is shade. And although machines and an industry devoted to that shade are at work, we're not talking about them. We're out to recall organic distraction.

The mind and body get many things right, and as it's barely within our power to control distraction, what if it's actually a server of prompts from deeper within? Snagging our attention in order to connect things, to add a fragment to the inner jigsaw, or just clear a moment to benefit growth. What if our distraction away from organic distraction was the real danger? We on this page are more likely to agree that thought for its own sake is good, and that, against mundane interruptions, our focused wills take longer aims and higher flights than average distractions can hinder. The atlas of pixels forming our days and lives comes from scattergun blasts of attention over fears and desires like inkblots, conscious and obscure, so naturally occurring and beyond our control that distractions on a graph could only appear as travelling spikes over resident saw-toothed traffic.

In an arena of super-focus only the super-focused can compete, and we're not by nature super-focused. It's not to say that we don't apply our best powers to the causes of our days, but that energies blow in gusts and results are tallied at the end – just as eyes are engineered to snapshot here and there and keep the brain awake, and minds to hum with data being sorted for a wider mandate of life: to drink from it deeply, in detail.

Sure, we're skirting around the driver in our day – the creation of money – but it's also irrelevant, as the thought is about the symptom, not the cause.

Our position could be that there's a third way. That we don't buy the notion of super-focus as a way of life, as the most human way forward; surely we're inventing machines for that, at least that was their initial contract, the creation of leisure. Nor do we feel that constant distracted leisure is a land of milk and honey, especially if the distractions are chosen by others and targeted at our weaknesses. No, if we believe that an eclectic traffic of real-life experiences is feeding an atlas of knowledge, then we want naturally-occurring distractions and self-motivated focus. We want the choice. So there we've staked a claim on what is good, but it still leaves the question: how much of each is satisfactory?

What kind of focus or distraction is genuine? Is there a key?

Leonardo da Vinci is reported to have said on his deathbed: '*Dimmi, dimmi se mai fu fatta cosa alcuna?*' ('Tell me, tell me if anything ever got done?') And we can surely relate from our life-beds, haunted by plans and dreams, to his sense of unfulfilment. It would be easy to imagine a genius's perfectionism setting standards too high for a sense of achievement; but then, lifting the curtain on his day-to-day life, other clues appear. The great artist spent much of his working life dodging creditors, having taken advances for works which he never completed. *The Mona Lisa* was still in da Vinci's possession when he died. He regarded it as unfinished despite having tinkered for more than a

What if our distraction away from organic distraction was the real danger?

How could da Vinci have created his works if he hadn't been fallible da Vinci?

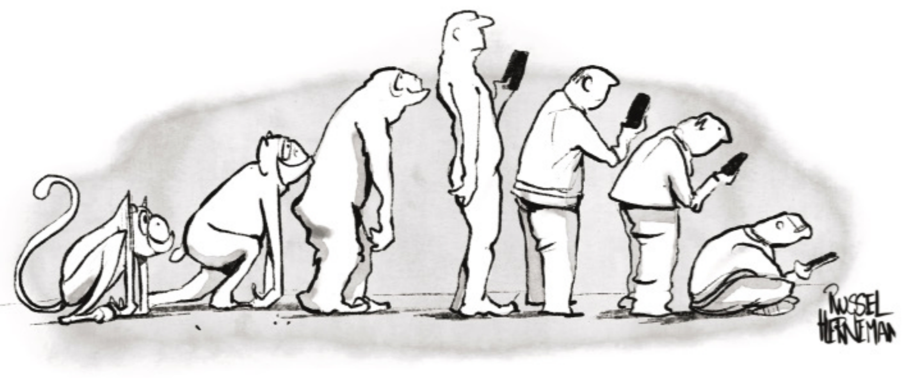
decade and a half. None of his now-famous anatomical studies ever left his personal notebooks, nor any engineering or scientific ideas. In the end barely twenty paintings survived him, and half a dozen of those remained unfinished and in his possession. Scientific historian Jacob Bronowski said of da Vinci: "His talents and energy were often wasted in doodles and unfinished projects. *The Last Supper* was only finished after his patron threatened to cut off all funds. *The Adoration of the Magi*, an early painting, was never finished and his equestrian projects were never built." More than one modern clinician has ventured, while acknowledging the dangers of diagnosing the long-dead, that da Vinci's practices bore all the hallmarks of ADHD. Others in the field of psychology remark that a more modern focus on output might only have led to 'productive mediocrity', trading historical masterpieces for greater volume.

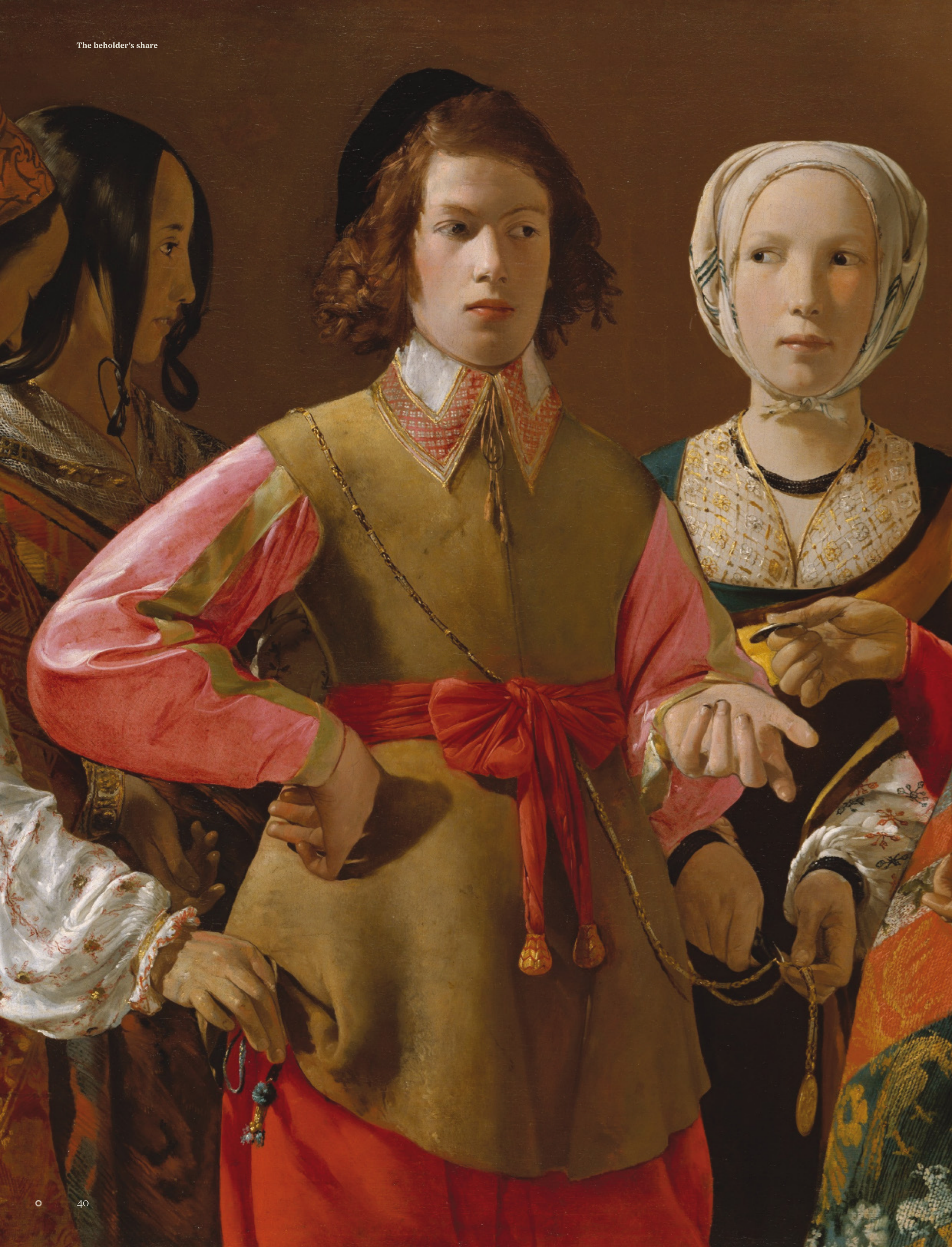
It brings us to the philosophical point of our wedge: how could da Vinci have created his works if he hadn't been fallible da Vinci? That's the way da Vinci was. Some academics also mounted a defence of the maestro against charges of procrastination. While it's true that he could spend years on projects that were never completed, procrastination, they argue, was not the complication. Instead they blame distraction; not quite the manner of it we've argued against here – as the maestro was distracted by his curiosity.

In distraction we may have found curiosity's concierge.

And curiosity, after all, is what brought us this far.

Meanwhile, machines will soon be as intelligent as people, they say. The big question is: which people?





by Nigel Warburton

The beholder's share

A few years ago I was in Oxford city centre on a busy Saturday. As I queued for a cashpoint there was a commotion next to me. A young man of about 20 had started foaming at the mouth and seemed to be on the verge of an epileptic fit. He fell towards the pavement and people around cradled him as he went down, making sure he didn't hit his head. They put him into the recovery position and tried to help him.

Within a few minutes he came round, and, apparently unaware of what happened, got up looking embarrassed, brushed off his clothes, and disappeared into the crowd of shoppers. Turning back to the cashpoint the man in front of me realised what had just happened. While he'd turned to see that the young man was OK, someone had stolen the cash that he'd just been served up by the machine. Then it dawned on us all. This hadn't been an opportunist theft; this had been a co-ordinated sting. The man who had fallen to the ground was an accomplice who had provided distraction while someone else moved in and took the money. It had been executed with aplomb. None of us saw that coming. We felt foolish and angry.

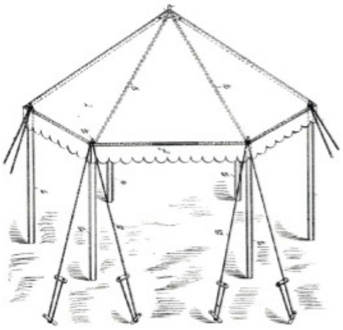
Ever since, I've been particularly wary of any distractions when I'm withdrawing cash from a machine. That trick of exploiting people's willingness to help a stranger seems especially mean-spirited. It reminds me of a similar distraction technique in which a 'lost tourist' approaches people at a café table, asking for directions. The 'tourist' asks for help getting to some nearby attraction, placing the map on the table. But the trick is that the map is placed on the helpful person's phone on the table. They innocently give directions. The 'tourist' thanks them profusely and disappears into the crowd with both the map and the kind person's phone.

In cities, particularly unfamiliar ones, we are overloaded with sensory information and it can be difficult to work out exactly what's going on around us, so we are particularly prone to malicious distraction. The most plausible account of human perception is predictive processing. This is roughly the idea that most of what we perceive is a projection of what we expect to find, and that we modify this in the light of incoming sensory data – rather than being as John Locke and other empiricists thought, blank receptive processors of incoming information. Seeing is bound up with expectations, or as N.R. Hanson put it long ago, "there's more to seeing than meets the eyeball". This explains why so many people miss the man in a gorilla suit in that famous and disconcerting experiment. They don't expect to see a gorilla, and are distracted by their attention being focused elsewhere. So they don't see the gorilla. Our experience doesn't feel like this, but it is very much shaped by what Ernst Gombrich called "the beholder's share": our mental set. We seem to see what is out there in the world, but in fact we contribute most of what we see.

One benefit of this is that we can really appreciate magic. When a skilled performer distracts us and then produces a disconcerting act of making something vanish or appear, or knows something that he or she shouldn't be able to know, we enjoy the discombobulation. Our expectations are completely overturned and, if the performer is clever enough, we have absolutely no idea how it was achieved. We have projected one view of what's happening in front of our eyes, but the magician has tricked us into a kind of complacency that doesn't allow us to observe what was really going on. Only when the end of the trick is reached do we realise that we have no idea what just happened before our very eyes.

However, the downside is we are gullible beings, easily tricked by clever thieves and anyone else who wants to manipulate us for personal gain. This is especially true in the digital age when so many people have access to data about us, and can plausibly present themselves as something they are not, mimicking official emails or telephone calls to phish for passwords or other key information.

Is the right response then, to always be on guard against deception? Should my experience at the cashpoint make me a more suspicious person, always checking to see if someone who claims to need help is what they seem and not a con artist? It's tempting to say yes. Certainly, a degree of scepticism about what seems to be going on is a good prophylactic against being robbed. But it is easy to tip over into a kind of paranoia, forever questioning people's motives and honesty. Anyone who travels abroad has to put their trust in other people some of the time. If not, they will only be able to live in a protective cocoon of suspicion that makes almost every aspect of their journey frightening because of the potential for deception. And that suspicious attitude, when it is visible, can be deeply offensive to people who are going out of their way to help you. Interacting with other people carries risks, always, but the solution isn't to become a recluse. Nor is it to stop travelling or putting ourselves in positions where we might be deceived. We don't want to be gullible fools, but on the other hand there is something deeply valuable about people who are prepared to take risks and be open to help others, and for the default position in human relations to be to assume that people are more or less who they present themselves to be. We shouldn't let a criminal minority destroy a widespread tendency to be open and helpful to those who seek our help. If we get tricked some of the time because we are too easily distracted from what is really happening, that is the price we pay for being ready to help strangers.



Only when the end of the trick is reached do we realise that we have no idea what just happened before our very eyes.

“Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?”

Plato

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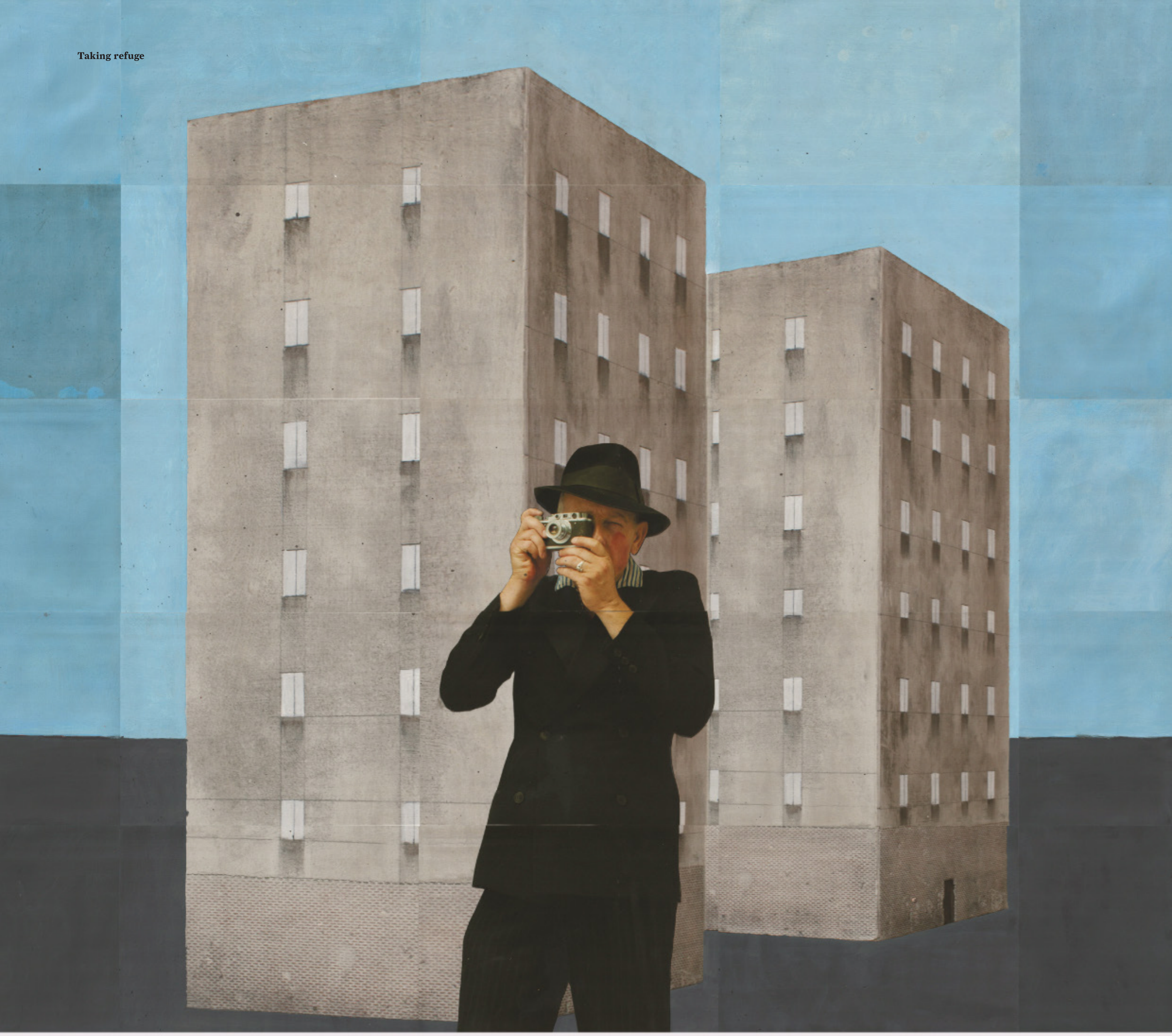
Being well distracted



Autoritratto con macchina fotografica, Collage, 2019, Mixed technique (collage, photography, acrylic paint), by Paolo Ventura

TAKING REFUGE IN ANOTHER WORLD

Artwork and words: Paolo Ventura

Over a decade ago you left the metropolis of New York to move to rural Tuscany with your family for a few years. With fewer distractions in Tuscany, how did it change your lifestyle and the way you work?

My son was four years old, and we moved to a remote town in Tuscany, a property I inherited from my father, the place where I spent my childhood. We moved from a super expensive and busy life in New York – where it was all about making money to survive and just work, work, and stress – to a situation where we had no rent to pay. In New York, it was about spending a lot of money and getting very little back, except from being in New York. My wife used to do an hour commute to the office every day on the subway. It was not until we had left New York that we realised that New York tries to make you think that without being in New York, you're lost – dead basically professionally. But then, you realise, that it's not true. When we went to Tuscany, there was time for me, for my work. And my wife could look after our son, who was very little.

In Tuscany, I returned to the place where I spent a lot of time in my childhood. I almost needed to reconcile myself with the place, with myself, and the story of my family. For me, as an artist, rather than looking for places that inspire me, it's more about looking for emotional things that drive my work. It's about looking for something that touches my soul.

As soon we got to Tuscany, we had more free time, and a lot of space. But we were also kind of lonely in such a remote place. And so, I built a little stage in the house, and we put on old costumes. And on a wall, with beautiful light, I decided to paint cities. So, in Tuscany, I started to make this little scene with my family and then later we created short stories using costumes and a painted backdrop.

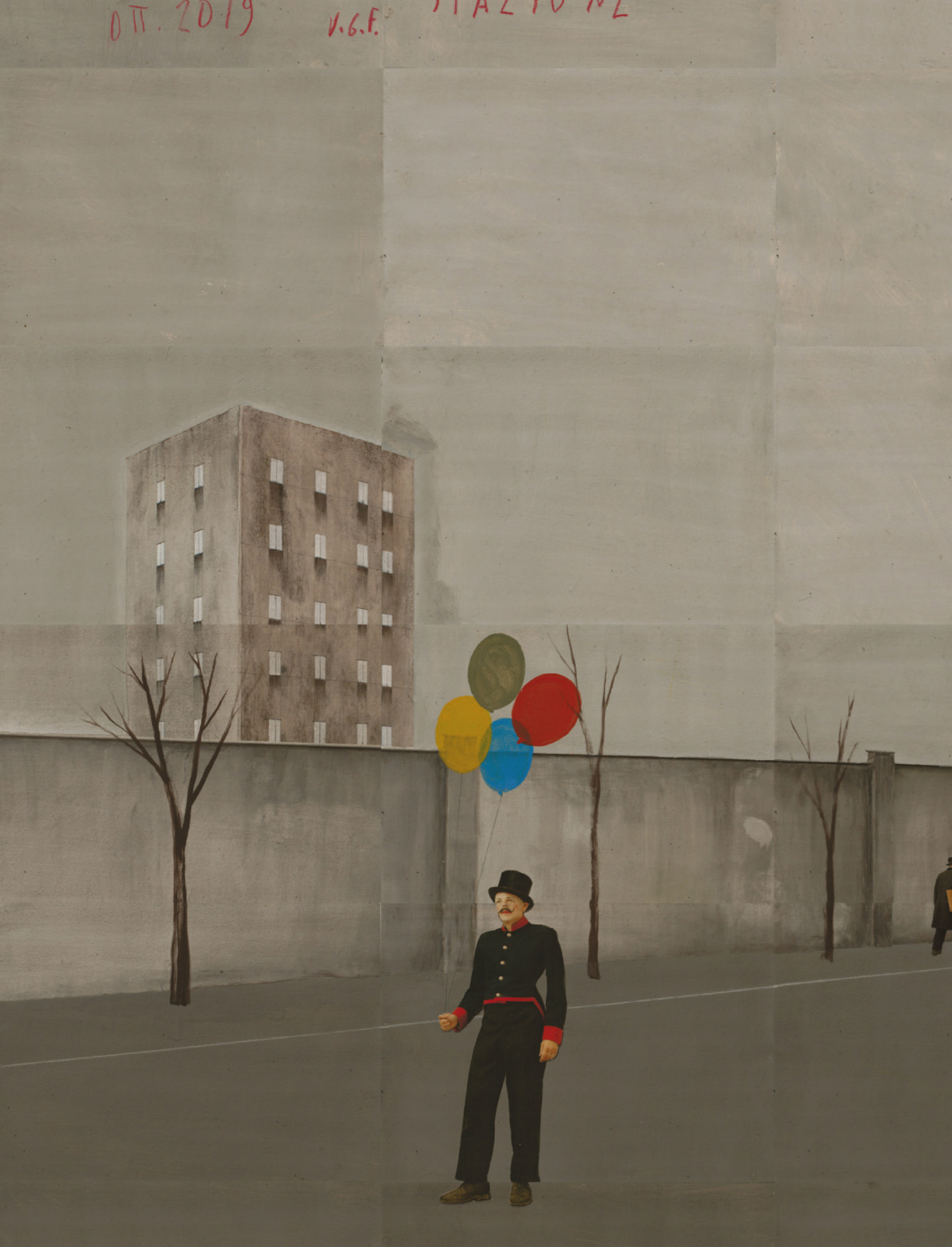
I grew up with an identical twin. We were always confused with each other. So, my identity was not clear, always one of two. Everybody always asked me, "Who are you?" They wanted to know if it was me or Andrea. But when I tried to think, who am I? I didn't know.

Your work is dreamlike, but it's not entirely fictional because of the element of photography. Are you trying to convey life as art?

The person that you see in my photograph is always me – with my son or my wife. I don't want to say that I don't accept reality, because I'm very aware of what's going on around me, but at the same time, I always feel much better in other places. Somebody once said, "You have two lives, one is real and the other is a dream about what you think about your life." Maybe, in my studio, I choose to be, for part of my day, in that dream.

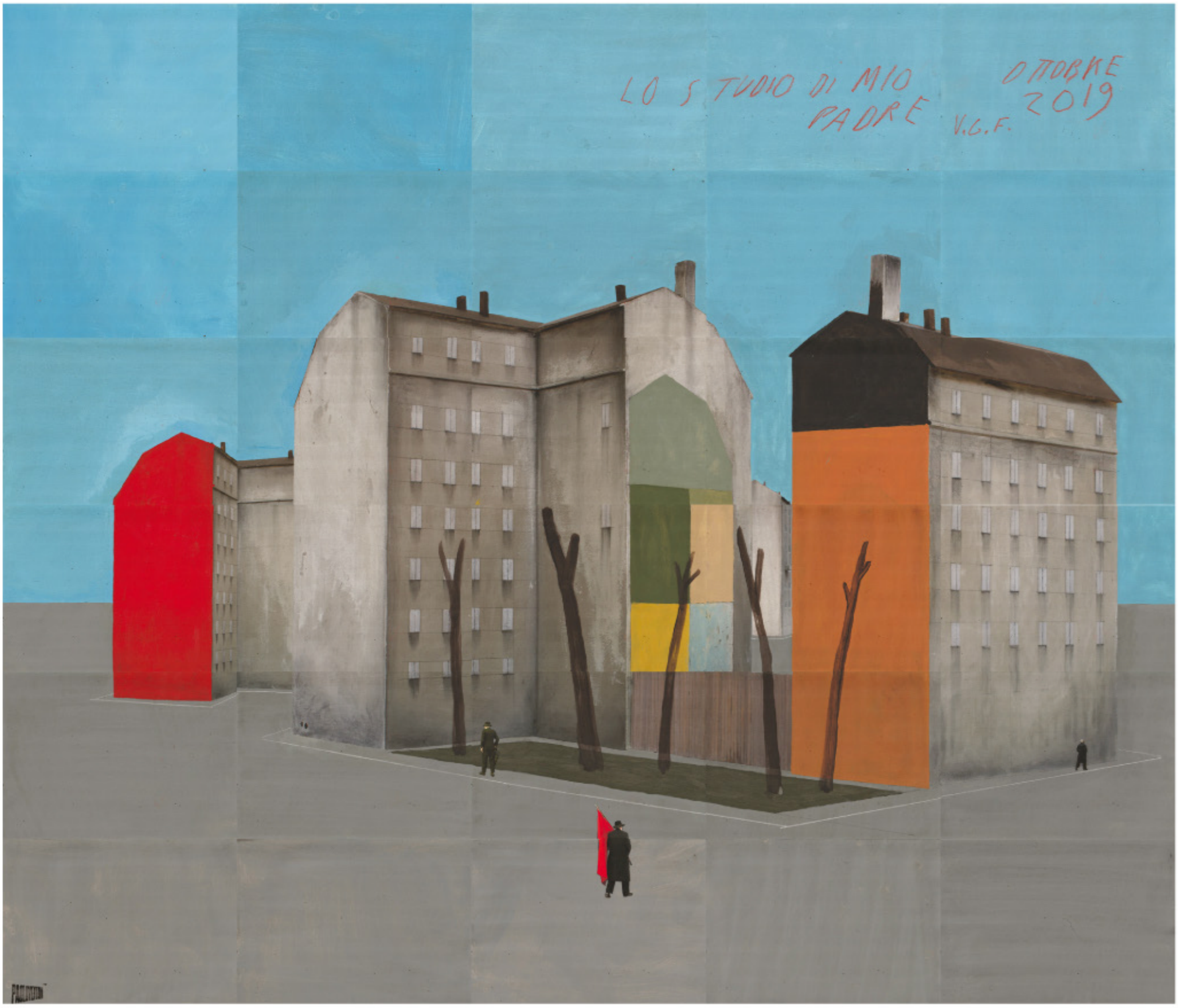
I love to recreate other worlds where there is no time. There is no time, and there is no end. It's like when you walk on a beach, and you don't want it to end because you feel good; I like to create an infinite invented world where you don't see the end. And so, it's extremely gratifying for me to be in that place. I can always take refuge in a fake world.

When I look at your artworks, there's always a distracting presence – someone


OTT. 2019
V.G.F.
TAZIONE

juggling or a spotted horse. I know that a major theme of your work is the sense of loss, specifically of losing someone you love. But distraction, too, is a loss. Because, while you are distracted on this or that – social media or internet searching and so forth – you are not experiencing your real life. You're losing that part of your life that could be spent doing something else, like pursuing the things that matter to you. Why do I see the theme of distraction in your work?

An American publisher wanted to do a book about all these little stories [my artwork]. As we started working on the book, putting the stuff together, the editor asked me: "Why in all these stories is there somebody that disappears?" And I said, "Really?" They wanted to know if there was a reason, and I said, "I don't know." Most of the time it's my son who disappears, or my wife, or my twin brother, or me disappearing. There's always a loss of something. When building my city, there are always people wandering around, with no direction, kind of lost, like they don't know where to go. I was born distracted – to survive basically, in a hostile family, in a dysfunctional


LO STUDIO DI MIO PADRE
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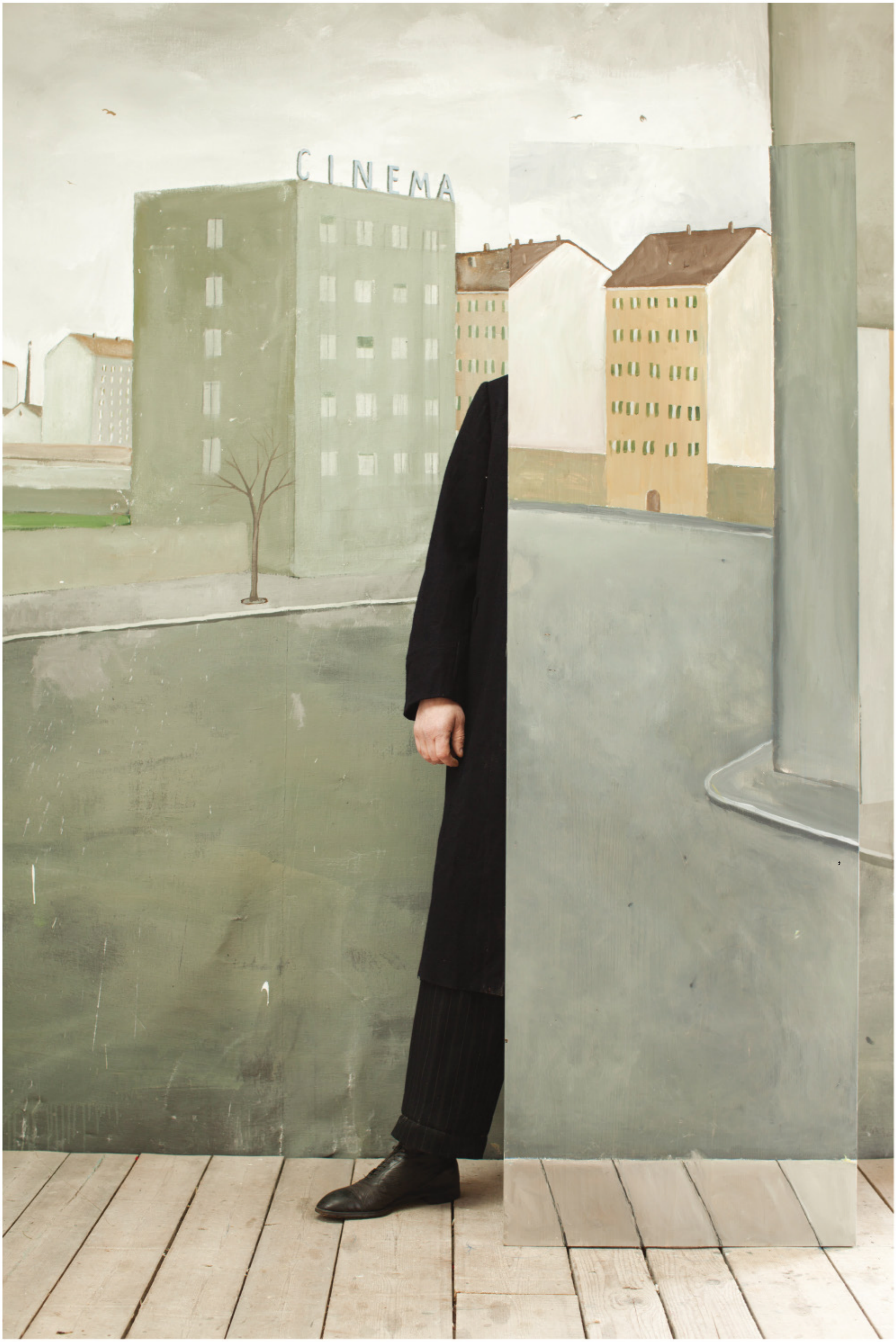
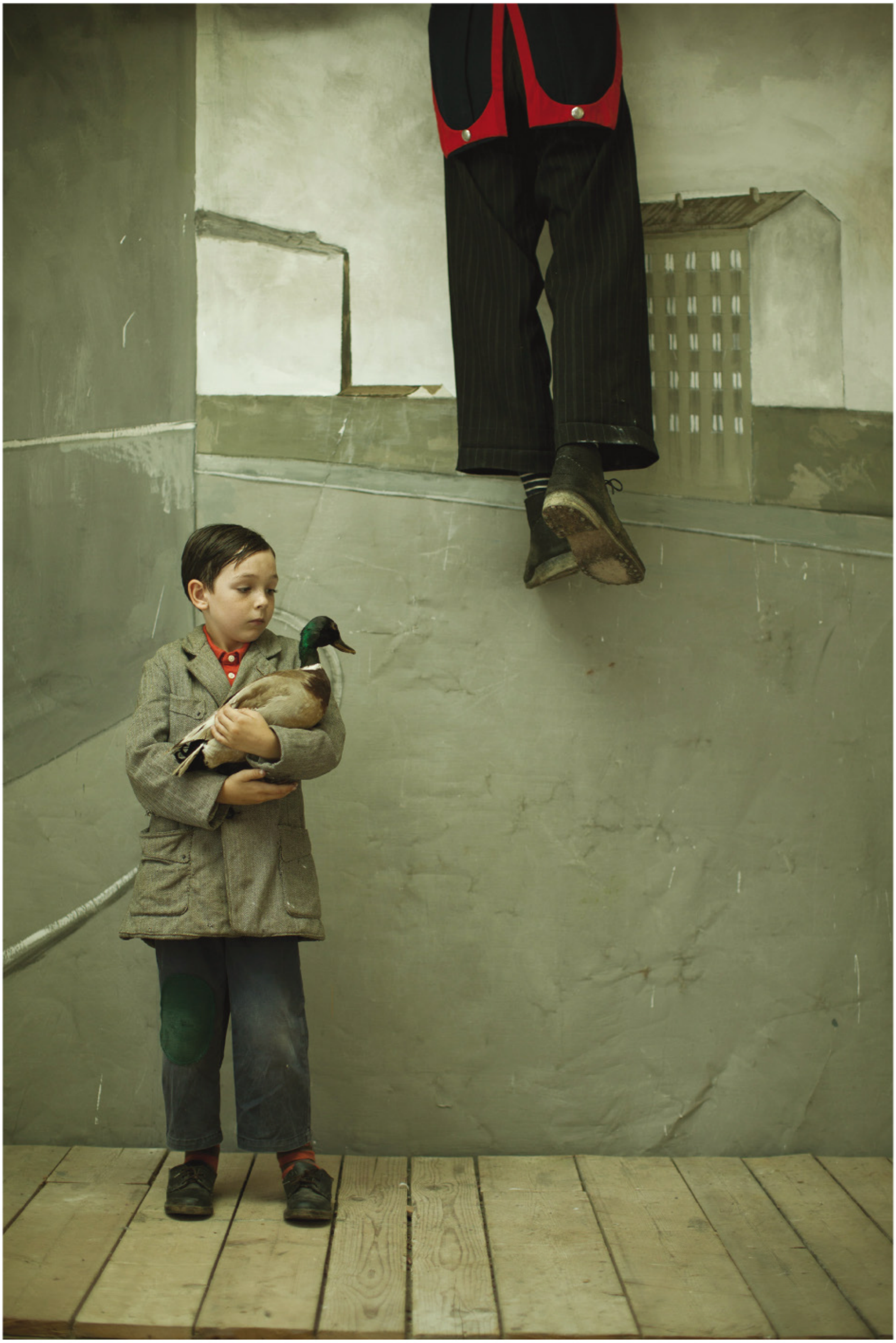
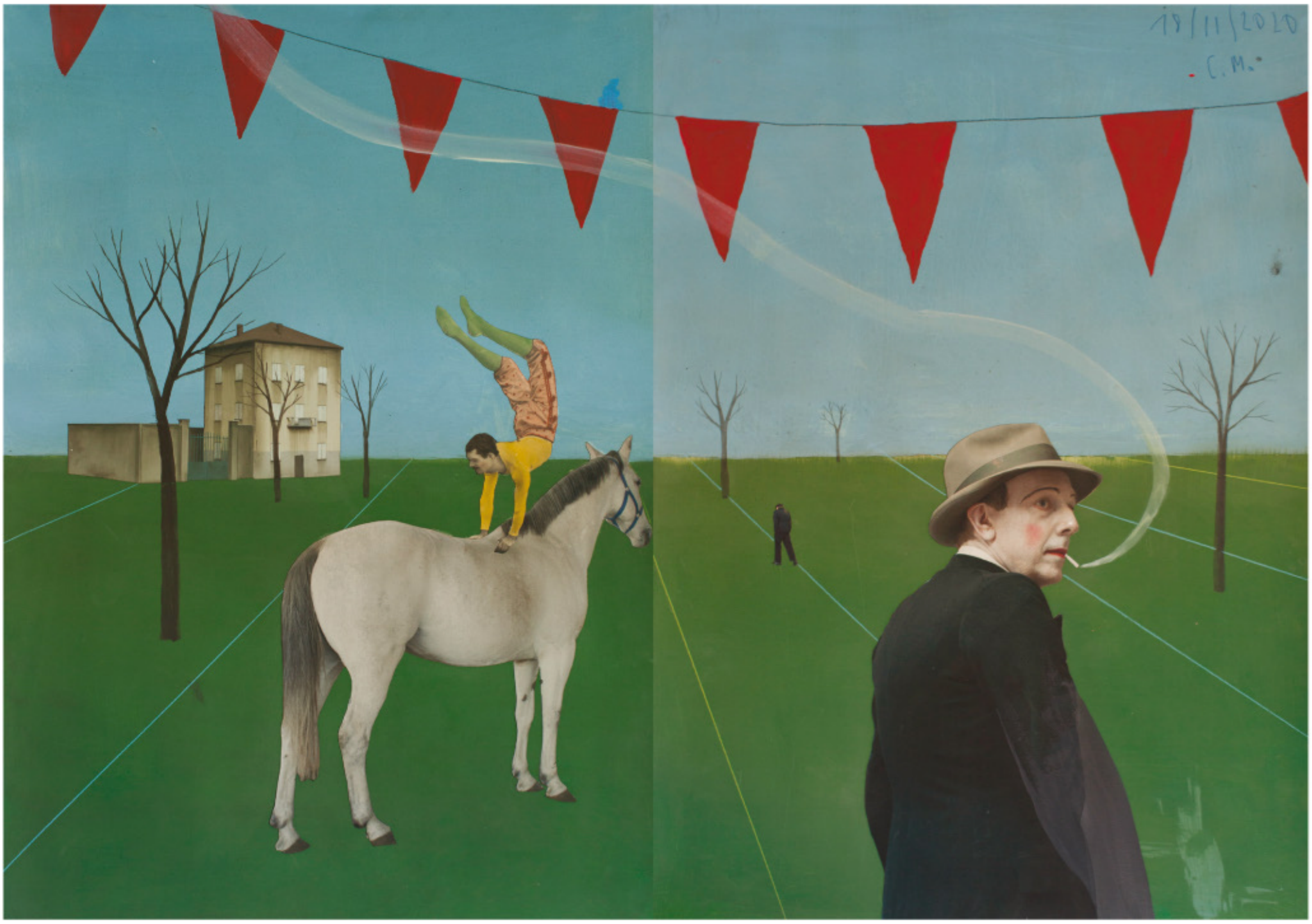
Lo studio di mio padre, from "Collage", 2019, Mixed technique (collage, photography, acrylic paint) by Paolo Ventura



The Vanishing Man #02, From "Short stories", 2013, Photography, by Paolo Ventura



The Red Balloon #02, Short stories, 2015, Photography, by Paolo Ventura



Flowers & Cigarettes #06, Flowers & Cigarettes, 2020, Mixed technique (collage, photography, acrylic paint), by Paolo Ventura

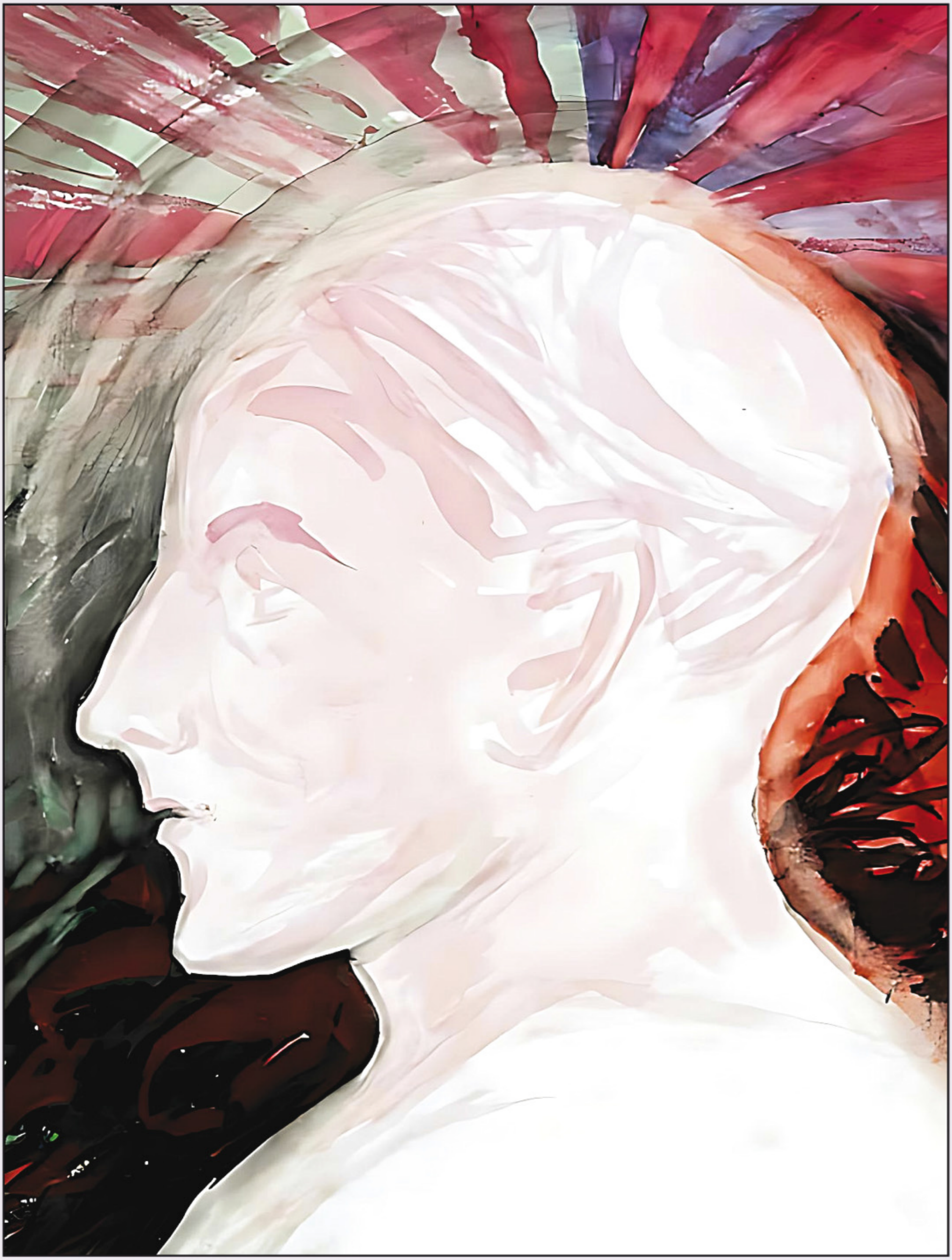
family – the mind can be a big distraction. It's a refuge where I can shelter.

In your work you meld painting and photography. Can you tell us more about this process?

Painting not only gave me the possibility to add things, which is almost impossible to do with photography, at the same time it gave it a certain depth of material, of the photo paper. I mean, photography and painting were enemies for almost a century and a half. Painters ignored photographers and photographers hated painters. Photography was not art! Paintings became more abstract because photography showed the reality, so you didn't need to be real anymore. It was always a stupid debate, but now with technology, we don't need paintings anymore either. They're both liars now. And so, now, they have finally found each other.

They have other enemies now, which is virtual reality. So now I find that they march together, painting and photography for me are the perfect combination. With photography, nobody takes photography seriously anymore; and painting has become a decoration. And so, finally, they are free, photography above all, to express itself as a form of art and not just to document because you cannot trust photography anymore (it's so easy, you can change everything with Photoshop now). Photographers doesn't have the responsibility to represent our world anymore. It's become another form of representation of emotion, and less of fact. We have other things to represent facts; now it's video.

Paolo Ventura's work can also be found on pages 4, 10, 15, 17, 32, 103, and 118.



Untitled, Hilma af Klint, 1933

by Marina Benjamin

Wandering minds

There has been an explosion of interest in mindfulness lately – that process of emptying the mind of its clutter and detritus and directing it to focus on something that repays your attention: the patterned surface of a leaf, the shape of a loved one's smile, the textures of a painting, the particular quality of light falling across the table. Countless books on mindful techniques, their spiritual pedigree, and their meditative benefits, jostle the shelves of bookstores and libraries. More than just part of our vernacular, learning to be mindful has become an aspirational goal.

Mindfulness makes me bridle. Not just because I am temperamentally ill-suited to its practice – my mind simply won't be quiet! – but because frequently I struggle to tell the difference between the vaunted wonders of laser-sharpened focus and the altogether more banal state of awed stupor.

Perhaps the fuss over mindfulness stems from the achievement it represents. Or, put another way, the intentionality it demands. Because in order to empty the mind and train your thoughts on something in particular, it is necessary to override the brain's default mode – which is the very opposite of mindful. Left to its own devices the mind prefers to flit and trip and skip and jump; to digress and meander and loop, rolling ceaselessly from one thing to the next, perpetually distracted. In fact, most neuroscientists now agree that the human mind is naturally inclined to wander.

Yet, however natural, this wandering state is far from biddable. Catch yourself in the act of day-dreaming, the mind hopping lightly from one unrelated thought to the next – from something someone said, to something you saw, to a memory from childhood, to the line of a song, to the image of a stylus on vinyl, to the merry-go-round you spun on in the park that you visited every day as a child, to the frown on your mother's face as she watched you, to the particular shade of her dark pink lipstick – catch yourself at any point in the train of thought and the spell is instantly broken.

Mind-wandering is capricious. The moment you become conscious of it, the string of connection unravels and dissolves, leaving behind nothing but brain fog. You've no idea where your head is at. Only that it's been up to something behind your back.

Much like sleep, or any other somnambulist state – reverie, day-dreaming, zoning out – the wandering mind is not something you command so much as submit to, or sink into, as if watching yourself from a distance. In *Move Closer*, British philosopher John Armstrong talks about how surrendering to the generative flow of associative thoughts, and subduing the self, is inherently creative. If you let it, he says, the wandering mind will surprise you. It will offer you novel thoughts and perspectives; open vistas; and let you glimpse new horizons. To paraphrase Timothy Leary, you need to tune out to tune in.

It turns out that the mind is most likely to work in associative fashion

Mind-wandering is capricious. The moment you become conscious of it, the string of connection unravels and dissolves, leaving behind nothing but brain fog.

when we're in the midst of undertaking tasks requiring low levels of attention – tasks so familiar they're almost automatic: driving, walking, swimming, cycling, showering, chopping vegetables. When our bodies are engaged in repetitive actions such as these, our minds tend to 'uncouple' from the action and drift off elsewhere.

My most fruitful reveries often occur when I am moving through landscape: gazing out of the window of a speeding train; sitting in a plane as its taxis towards the runway; or thinking of nothing in particular in the back seat of a moving car. In such states, I daydream whole lives, some filled with such realistic sentiment I become teary. I can float across mental terrains in which the scenery keeps changing, the backdrop and foreground now teeming, now bare, now busy, now still; and then I inhabit a multiverse of a million choices, taking many paths in pursuit of many ends.

In this way, reverie not only gives us a glimpse of the mind at play, it encourages a kind of plasticity of thought.

In creative writing classes, I tell students to go for a walk if they're struggling with character plot, or argument, and if they're blocked and can't face the blank page – because an excessive focus on what's eluding you can be counter-productive. Instead, I encourage my students to trust that their brains know what they are searching for. And that in order for that knowledge to emerge and drift up towards the light, they need to trick themselves: let their wandering minds mull on the problem while they do something else.

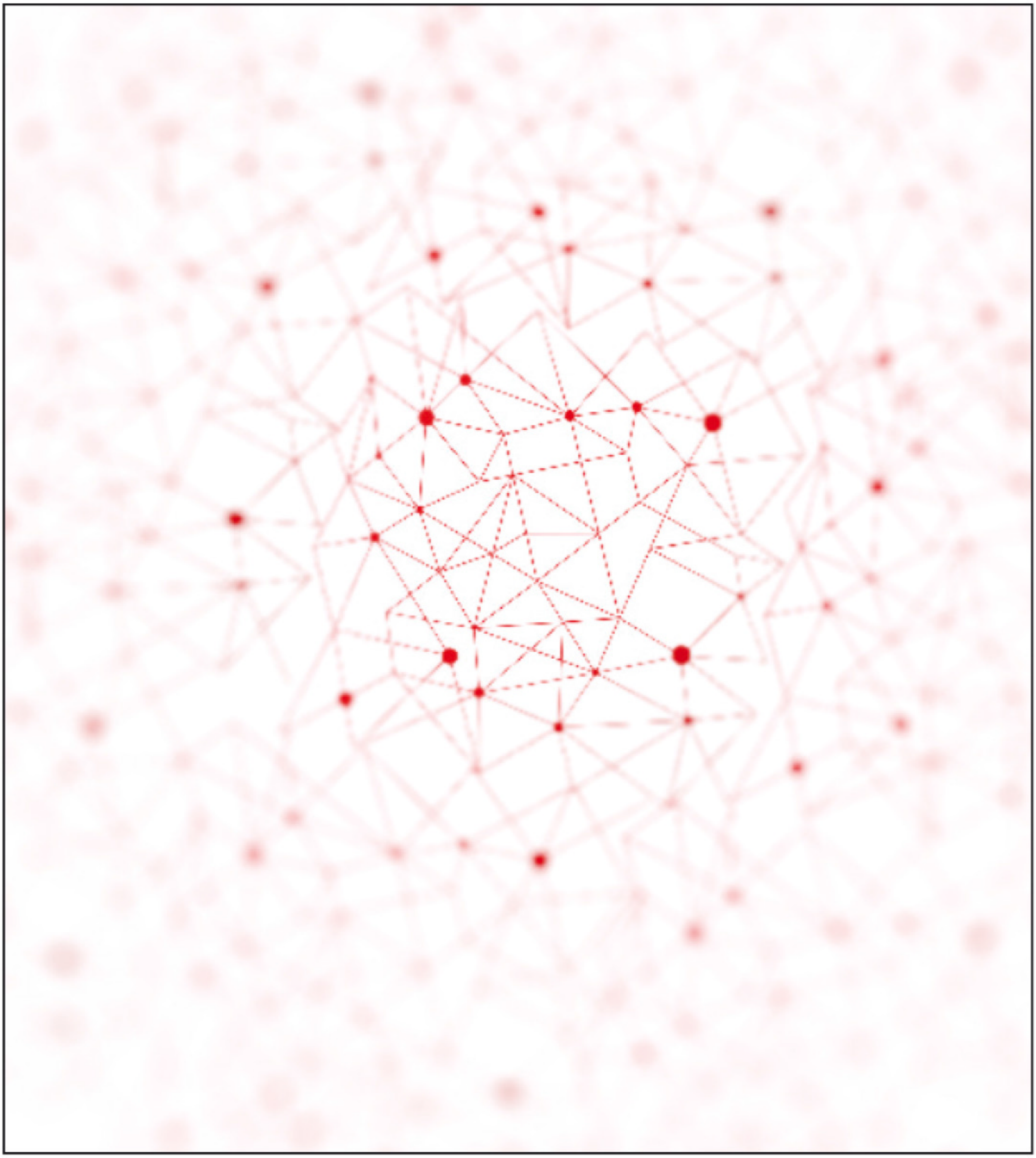
If we cannot command the wandering mind to solve things for us, we can invite it to do so. We can create hospitable conditions for it to show itself, like some shy creature we entice out of the dark with the promise of something to feed on.

Novelist and neuroscientist Rachel Genn suggests that reverie, like dreams, provides a bridge or a dialogue between unconscious and conscious thinking. She also likens reverie to William James's concept of the 'fringes' of objects, when we experience that nebulous sense of more-ness at the edges of our perception. This is a form of 'metacognition' that lends 'overtones' to our awareness of things. For Genn, reverie is work, not holiday. It's a provocative suggestion; and it chimes with the way associative thinking solves problems or serves as a fount of inspiration. But if mind wandering is work, it is the gentle kind – an engine idling rather than revving. The Germans have a lovely expression for this: '*die seele baumeln lassen*' – let the soul dangle. It makes me wonder if the mind isn't more like a muscle than engine, needing to contract then relax, to think in a focused fashion, then hang loose.

Though the wandering mind sometimes gets stuck in a loop – if we're in the grip of anxiety, say, or insomnia – disrupting our tranquillity with unpleasant, grinding rumination, for the most part the mind's ability to distract itself is beneficial. In *Creativity and the Wandering Mind*, Charles Dobson and Kalina Christoff cite a study of sculpture students in universities that found that students with access to 'repo depos' – a yard full of a randomly assorted junk – were more creative than those without. Studies with children show that unstructured time encourages self-directed thinking, while other studies suggest that open-minded people, whose consciousness is permeable, more readily connect disparate ideas.

The next time I catch myself day-dreaming, my mind sifting and sorting impressions and emotions, sense experience and memory, mixing things up and reordering them, I might well learn something.

At the very least I'll know that my mind is quite capable of entertaining itself in my absence.



“Nothing can be accomplished without solitude.”

Pablo Picasso

DISTRACTION

/dɪˈstrækʃn/

noun:

1. a thing that takes your attention away from what you are doing or thinking about;

2. an activity that amuses or entertains you.

Origin:
late Middle English: from Latin *distractio*(*n*-), from the verb *distrahere*, from *dis*- 'apart' + *trahere* 'to draw, drag'.

Source: Oxford English Dictionary

by Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore

Age of distraction

For years, I played a game of virtual cat and mouse. I would post a photo, wait for 'likes', look to see what friends were doing, then, finding myself too distracted, my head spinning, delete the app. A few weeks later I would re-download it.

I knew that social media took me away from the physical world and I knew that, with a few clicks, it could drag me into its orbit, where I would remain for countless minutes, sometimes hours, before coming up for air. But I couldn't resist it. The colours, the lights, the social updates, the endless scrolling – it was all too tempting, even as it muddied my brain.

We live in an age of distraction, spearheaded by the digital revolution. In 2022, over half the world's population (some 3.96 billion people) used social media, a number predicted to reach 4.41 billion by 2025. The average person spends just under two-and-a-half hours on social media a day and the number of people who log in to social media each month numbers in the billions.

Often social media fills a need, or at the very least a void. It can provide social connection, a sense of belonging, and critically, information: from how to detangle problematic hair to details of life under siege. It is also a podium, of course, for disinformation: Russian propagandists peddle their own version of the war on the same big tech platforms where Ukrainians expose it.

But while social media can make us feel good, momentarily at least, and can be a useful resource, it is also addictive. Social media use releases dopamine in our brains, known as the 'happy drug'. These hits are short lived: even as we keep posting pictures, liking photos, and amassing new followers, we are never satisfied. We need to keep active to get the next hit. Brain scans of heavy social media users are similar to that of drug and gambling addicts.

Our attention spans have suffered: one widely-cited Microsoft report found that attention spans have dropped from 12 seconds in the year 2000 to eight seconds today – less than that of a goldfish. As the report states: "Heavy multi-screeners find it difficult to filter out irrelevant stimuli – they're more easily distracted by multiple streams of media."

To put it another way, our search for constant stimulation and our dependence on dopamine hits has consequences: there is a reason that the equivalent to *War and Peace* hasn't been written on social media.

"Amid the glittering promise of our new technologies . . . we are nurturing a culture of social diffusion, intellectual fragmentation, sensory detachment," Maggie Jackson writes in *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*. "The way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention."

It isn't just that human beings are weak. Social media is designed to keep us refreshing our feeds again. And again. And again. Big tech companies such as Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, "maximise engagement using psychological tricks and manipulations [in order to keep users] online for as long as possible," says Josh Golin, executive director at the American non-profit and advocacy group Fairplay. The end goal? "To track as much data as possible in order to advertise to [users]."

Psychologist Susan Linn, author of *Who's Raising the Kids? Big Tech, Big Business and the Lives of Children*, puts it more starkly, still. "The tech companies," she insists, "are in a war for our attention and our children's attention".

This is particularly problematic for children, says Linn, "because their brains are developing and growing, and the things that children do or don't do really affect the architecture of the brain. The more they do something the stronger the link between the synapses is: the more you do something the more you are compelled to do it."

At around the age of 10, receptors for oxytocin and dopamine multiply in the brain. But while adolescents may crave more external affirmations, which social media now supplies 24/7, they

> **“The more they do something the stronger the link between the synapses is…”**

have yet to fully mature their prefrontal cortex, which helps regulate responses to those affirmations.

“The problem is that [this] is going to create an instinct, an impulse, a desire for pleasure. And, usually, we can stop that with the brain’s behavioural inhibition system, the prefrontal cortex. That doesn’t develop fully until the age of 25,” explains Mitchell J. Prinstein, chief science officer at the American Psychological Association (APA) and author of *Popular: The Power of Likability in a Status-Obsessed World*. “You’ve got around a dozen years there where kids are all gas and no brake.”

These are also the years when children are amassing critical skills for future success, which rely on the ability to absorb complex information, to concentrate, and, yes, to avoid distractions.

This is a relatively recent phenomenon. When I was a teenager in the 1990s, we had no email, no smart phones, and no social media. I didn’t write *War and Peace*. But I did have time to read novels, go for long walks, and pen (very bad) poetry. Rather than pick up my phone every time I wanted a distraction, I picked up a book. That is harder than ever to do today. Even as I write this article, despite my best attempts to resist, I am drawn to my apps multiple times, waiting for them to buzz with the latest notification from friends, my husband, my parents, my kid’s school – and impatiently opening them when those notifications seem too slow.

This anticipation is so strong, and our enthrallment so deep-rooted, that there is now a name for the perception that our phone is vibrating when it’s actually silent: phantom vibration syndrome. This syndrome affected 89 per cent of undergraduates, according to one study published in *Computers in Human Behavior*.

Why is this important? Because humans are not great at distinguishing between distractions that do not matter (a social media alert) and those that do (a fire alarm going off) – we jump to attention at both. Heeding that notification uses up precious energy supplies in our brains – a supply that is finite. And as our brains can only absorb a certain amount of information at any one time, flooding it with social media means we can’t apply it to other more meaningful, and creative, pursuits.

Living in a state of constant hyper-vigilance is mentally exhausting and, ultimately, unsatisfactory. There’s a reason why entering a state of ‘flow’ (when we fully pay attention to something and are completely immersed in an activity) feels so good. And there is a reason why distraction, and failure to meet goals, feels so desultory.

The fact remains, however, that social media has become a billion-dollar economy, spawning countless careers: it is a necessary boon to one’s brand, when branding is everything. “Where would I be without Instagram?” asks actress Tavi Gevinson in a New York magazine article where she grapples with how social media has shaped her life. “Without Instagram, it’s possible I wouldn’t have gotten the acting job that moved me to New York, nor the relationships, experiences, and identity that followed. I definitely would have less income and less of an audience to share this essay with.”

So what can we do? Prinstein believes that “it’s time for some pause and reflection”: just because social media was invented, doesn’t mean we should blindly follow its compulsions without asking how we want to use it. It comes down to purpose: which platforms help us effectively navigate our lives? How often should we open them? Should we have regular breaks and scheduled time “off”?

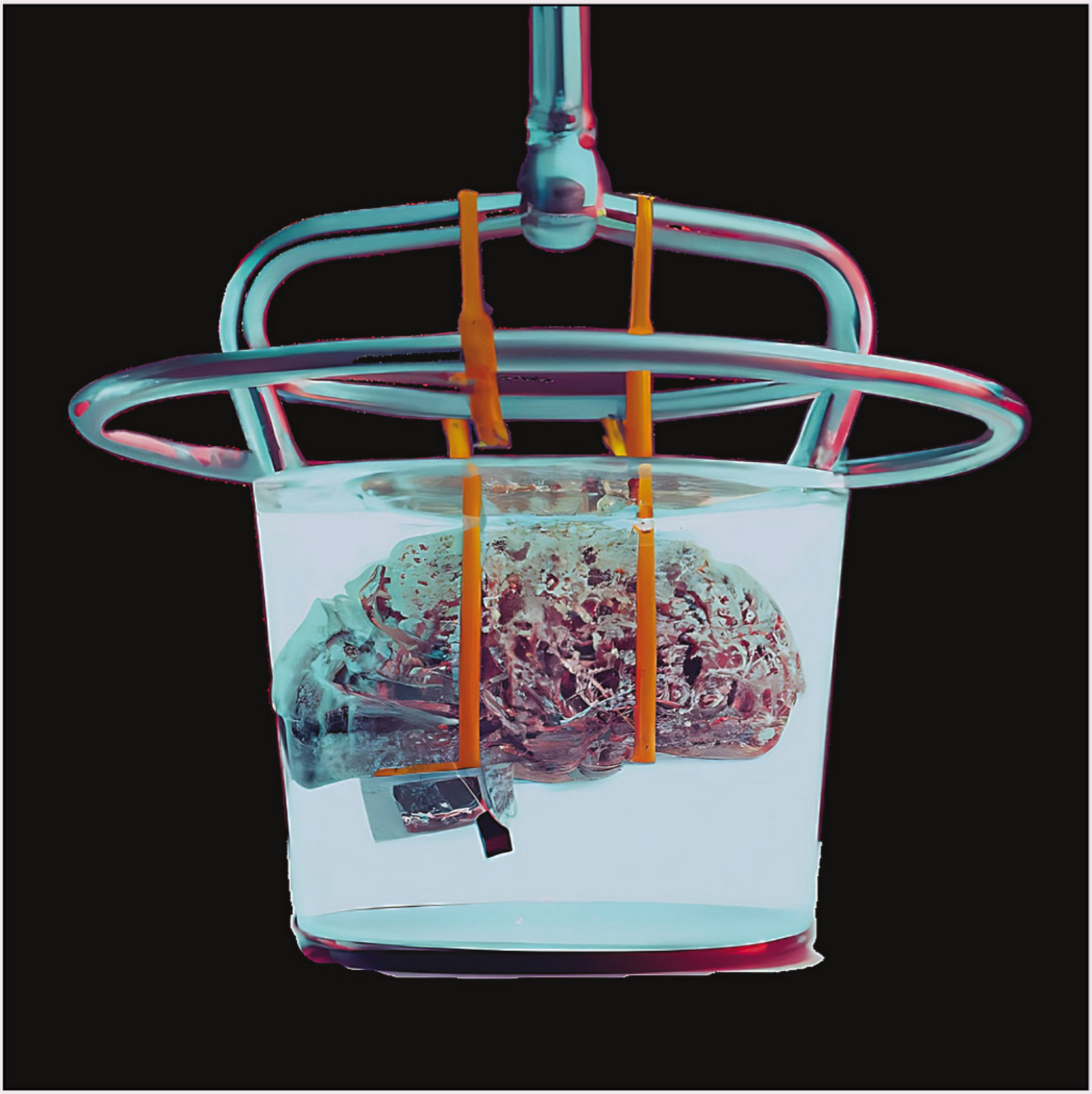
Ultimately, what makes us feel happy? Sometimes, after all, we want to be distracted. One friend with a newborn baby scrolls through Instagram during the long, lonely nights when she is up doing the night feeds. The attention snacks are all she can absorb and she is grateful for them. Others find even these small interactions can create intrusions that bleed into their everyday lives.

One thing is for sure: for times of deep, sustained concentration, social media is a hindrance. Yet distraction isn’t inevitable and the latest TikTok video doesn’t always need to be watched. Notifications can be silenced and phones can be put in drawers.

As Elie Venezky writes in *Hack Your Brain: Secrets of an Elite Manhattan Tutor*: “Focus is a muscle, and you can build it. Too many people labour under the idea that they’re just not focused, and this becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.”

Over the last few years, as my life has irrevocably, wonderfully changed since having a baby and I have less time than ever for myself, I have tried to take a more mindful approach to social media. Twitter is helpful for work, so I use it intermittently. Instagram isn’t, so I have deleted it. For good.

This has given me valuable space to concentrate my attention on the things that matter: reading my 22-month-old daughter her favourite book, absorbing the scent of a sizzling onion when I cook, seeing friends in person, and writing. Time is not infinite: I don’t want to fritter mine away. I want to, finally, be present.



“Just as the eye which constantly shifts its gaze, now turning to the right or to the left, now incessantly peering up and down, cannot see distinctly what lies before it, … so too man’s mind when distracted by his countless worldly cares cannot focus itself distinctly on the truth.”

Basil of Caesarea

Brain in a vat, by New Philosopher

Interviewee: Stefan van der Stigchel
Interviewer: Zan Boag

Times of distraction

Stefan van der Stigchel is a professor in Cognitive Psychology at the department of Experimental Psychology at Utrecht University and principal investigator of the research group AttentionLab. For his research on visual attention, he received a VENI and VIDI NWO grant, and recently an ERC Consolidator Grant and VICI NWO grant. Stefan is author of the popular science book *How Attention Works* in January 2019. His second book *Concentration: Staying Focused in Times of Distraction* was released in the Netherlands in November 2018 and published by MIT Press in 2020. A third book, *Grip op je aandacht* [Grab Your Attention], was published in 2020. His books have further been translated into Russian, Korean, and Chinese.

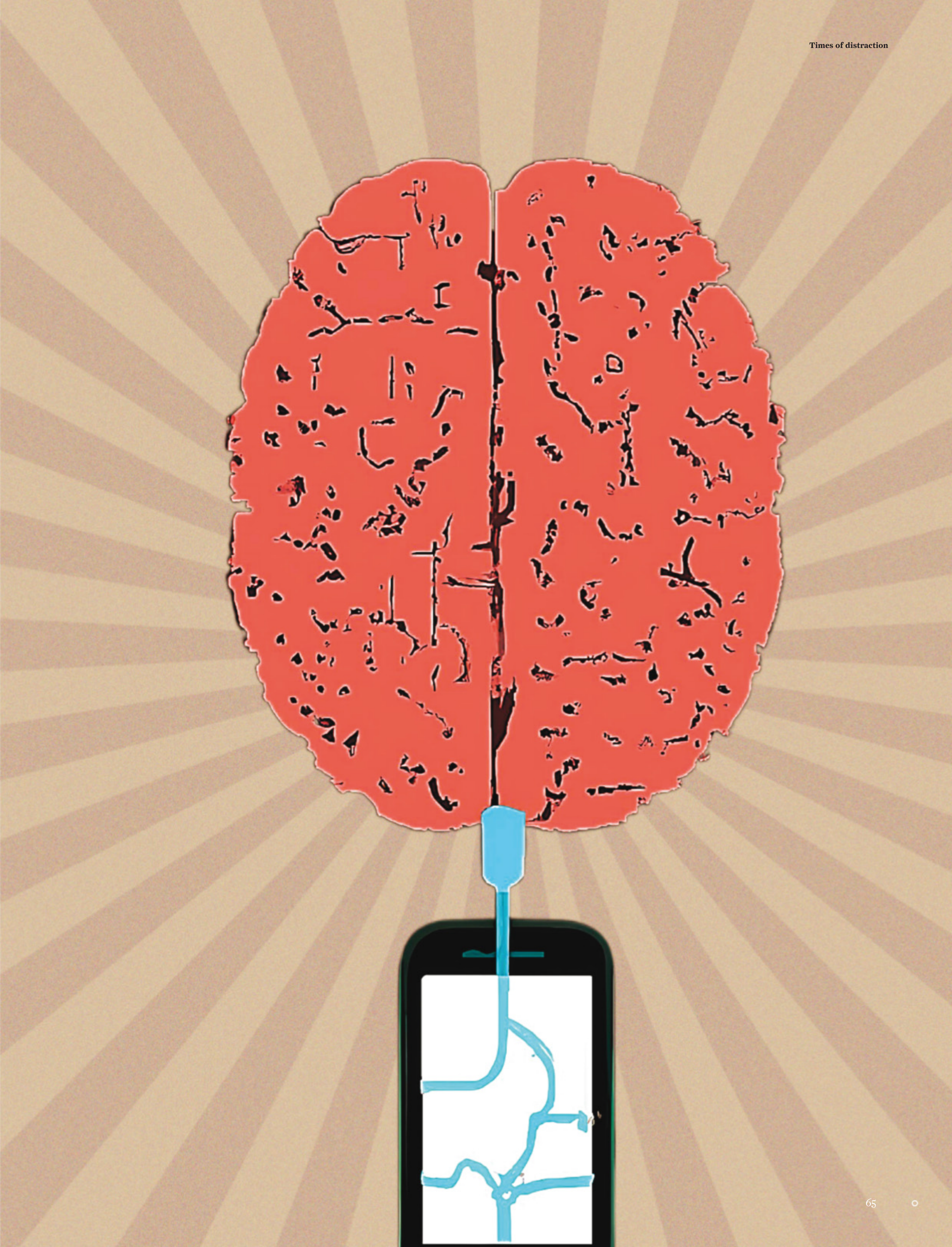
Zan Boag: *In your book,* Concentration: Staying Focused in Times of Distraction, *it's interesting that in your prologue you write about how Seneca concluded more than 2,000 years ago that there was too much information out there – that "the abundance of information was becoming a major source of distraction". This resurfaced in the 18th century when people in Germany spoke of a 'plague of books' and that the end result would be that people would struggle to concentrate. So, concerns about the amount of information are nothing new. But is it different this time? Is our ability to concentrate adversely affected by the sheer volume of information and distractions in contemporary society?*

Stefan van der Stigchel: It's good to start off by saying: there has always been too much information. When you walk outside in nature or when you are in your own house, there's too much information around you to take in. Our brain can only process part of the information. That's just a fundamental aspect of our brain: it has to select. That selection is something we call 'attention'. What has changed is that the competition for our attention has increased massively.

Attention can only be allocated at one location at a time. This means that if somebody wants to convey a message to you, they have to attract your attention. What has changed is that a lot of people and companies have become aware of this fact and they also have gained access to something that's really close to you, like your mobile phone, your laptop, or your tablet. This means that they are able to attract your attention a lot more.

This is different than when you are walking alone in the woods or when you don't have your mobile phone with you – in those moments companies and institutions simply don't have that same ability to attract your attention. So the amount of information around us has increased, but I think more importantly, so has the ability for others to capture your attention.

When you are carrying your mobile phone and you get a notification,



the whole process that starts is mostly reflexive. In a busy city centre there's not a lot you can do about the fact that people will try to capture your attention by creating advertisements that are attention grabbing by nature.

However, in a lot of situations we actually need distraction. People sometimes say to me, "I don't want to be distracted." But, in fact, you do want to be distracted. Distraction allows us to stay safe. When you cross a busy street, you have to be captured by information that might be relevant to you. Or if you are in a quiet environment and somebody walks into the room, you need to be aware of that because that's going to keep you safe. So, it is a principal mechanism of the brain to monitor the world around us. When there's something different, something novel, something salient, this will automatically capture your attention. This is very important, but unfortunately, we frequently create an environment in which we have a lot of these attention-grabbing phenomena that are not crucial for your safety.

Importantly, the brain doesn't know the difference. If the brain is distracted, it doesn't know whether it's a notification for a new cat video or whether it's a lion entering the room. The brain is only signalling, "There's something new. Check it out." Only then does the brain know what it is and by then you are already distracted. The moment you realise, "Oh, it was a notification for a new cat video," it's already too late because your concentration will have been broken.

Now you mentioned that it's something that our brain is wired to do, that we're wired to be distracted in case a lion walks into the room, for example. Is distraction related to fear?

Yes, a lot. We know that stimuli that are fearful in nature, for instance spiders, are more distracting than those that are not fear-related. The brain seems to have a radar that keeps track of new information around us, including stimuli that are related to fear. There's a lot of new information around us and not everything captures your attention. This means there's a certain threshold that needs to be reached for your attention to be captured. Strong stimuli and fear-related stimuli that could potentially be related to your safety will gain even more strength in that competition.

And the media has cottoned onto this, it's why when you look through the news there's so much to elicit fear, to grab our attention.

Yes, absolutely. The media knows exactly what type of words and pictures to use, because they know these are going to be attention-grabbing.

I remember interviewing David Suzuki some years ago. He had been in television for a very long period of time, and in the 1970s he had a science program on TV. He said that they were able to talk non-stop about science for 30 minutes, sitting at a desk talking about science, and people had an attention span to be able to listen to this. A few decades later, he said that it was rare for the program to have 30 seconds without flicking to another image or idea because they found that people's attention span had diminished and they were unable to sit there for 30 minutes any longer. Has there been a change in the way that we process information? Are we now unable to process large chunks of information over an extended period?

That's the million-dollar question, and the problem is: we don't know. I'm a scientist and I want to tell you what science tells us, but there is no scientific evidence to back up this claim that we're less able to focus than 20 or 10 years ago. This doesn't mean it's not true. We simply do not know. I would like to know, but if you think about how you would design a study in order to test this, you run into all type of problems. Because what is 'attention span'? I am sure that if a professor tells his students, "I'm going to give you 5,000 euros if you answer a question correctly after half an hour of concentration listening to me," they

The brain seems to have a radar that keeps track of new information around us, including stimuli that are related to fear.

would have no problems concentrating during the lecture. I think intrinsically we can still concentrate if it's important to us.

If we have an incentive of some sort.

Yes, if we have the right motivation. If you want to attend to something now, you take the conscious decision to ignore I don't know how many million streams of other types of information. I could be watching one out of a billion videos right now. That's a difficult decision, but I'm confident that we still make those decisions now, like I've made a conscious decision to talk to you for the next 45 minutes. So I've put my phone away, notifications are off, and the door is closed. I do think it's harder these days to make these conscious decisions, so that's one. Second, evolution is of course not so quick that all of a sudden we have a brain that is no longer able to focus. We know evolution is a very slow process.

We also know that you can compare concentration to a muscle. If you haven't concentrated for a while, your ability to concentrate will become reduced. But it doesn't mean that if you start to re-train your ability to concentrate that it cannot reach its maximal level again.

Concludingly, deciding what to attend to is harder than it used to be because now you ignore millions of streams of information if you consciously decide to attend to something. So I'm not so negative about our potential to concentrate.

When I wrote the book, the first version I had was quite dramatic, about how our attention is gone forever. But then when you start looking into the literature, you realise that's not true. There was this recent book by Johann Hari where he states that our attention is lost, and on the back it reads that the average American teenager can only concentrate for 19 seconds. But when you look at the data, there is no evidence for this. And if you think about it, if you think about motivation, about evolution, that concentration is a conscious decision that you have to make… well, our brains haven't changed. Our environment has changed. Importantly, we can decide about our environment. Like you, I don't know why you're in France, but I can imagine that this is a place where there are perhaps less social distractions, where it's easier to take a break, you don't have the busy city life around you, so it might be a conscious decision to get away from the busy city centres. In the beginning that might be difficult, but if you stay there for two to four weeks, you start to realise "Hey, I'm starting to read books again. It's easier to listen to someone." So we do have some control over our attention span.

I suppose it's just more difficult. Now, I'd like you to explain how concentration works. How does the brain function while it is concentrating?

When you want to understand how concentration works, I have to tell you something about working memory. Working memory is the part of your brain, located in the frontal cortex, which is responsible for executing complicated actions, so not everything taxes your working memory. Especially motor actions like walking or biking do not tax your working memory. You don't need to think about it. But a lot of complicated cognitive tasks will tax your working memory, like doing a calculation, reading, writing, listening, talking.

The working memory can only perform one task at a time. This means that if you want to concentrate, you have to sustain that task in your working memory for a longer period of time without doing something else that also taxes your working memory. And that's complicated. As we've discussed, there are many things in our environment that compete for our attention. If you lose that battle, you will stop what you're doing and your working memory will stop executing that action, which also means that multitasking does not exist.

You cannot do two things at the same time that both require working memory. So concentration really means holding a complicated task for a longer period of time in your working memory without being distracted and without doing something else. We talk a lot about external distractions, but we also have internal distractions: incoming thoughts about your date yesterday evening, what you're going to do tonight, or any worries or fears you might have. Those are internal distractions and those impact your concentration in the same way these external distractions do.

So, by the sound of things, it is really quite difficult to concentrate in the first instance.

Yes, absolutely.

What is the transformation that happens to the brain when there is some sort of distraction? And does it take quite some time for you to get back to a state of concentration?

You can compare working memory to a workbench on which you have all the material necessary to perform a specific task. If you stop performing that task and do something else, if you're distracted, it means that you need to get all the material off the workbench and you get new material on it in order to deal with the distraction. If you then want to go back to your original task, this will take time, so called 'switch costs'. Everyone has switch costs, but the amount and how long it takes all depends on the overlap between the two tasks. For instance, if you're now writing down notes on what I'm saying, the overlap will be relatively large and you would therefore have limited switch costs.

If you're now writing down a recipe for the dinner that you're going to have this evening, it's going to take longer in order for you to go back to your original task. There have been some observational studies in open office spaces that a lot of people have to work in, and there they observed that it can take up to 20 minutes before people pick up their original task again. This doesn't mean that every switch takes 20 minutes. It's just an illustration in real life of what it could mean if somebody starts talking to you while you're working on a specific task.

And it makes sense, right? You're fully engaged in a task, your whole working memory is designed currently to perform that task. Somebody starts talking to you and this is the moment you go and have some coffee, you take a break, simply because you know that it will take a lot of time for you to get back to your original task again. A lot of people have to deal with this in their work environment, which is problematic because switching also requires mental effort.

If you think about working memory as a workbench, it becomes clear that it is mentally tiring if you have to switch between tasks the whole time, especially if it's forced on you by the external environment, for example the phone ringing or somebody passing by. You're immersed in your task and all of a sudden you have to deal with something else and then get back to your original task again. Research has shown that people who have endured such a day full of distractions are more mentally tired at the end of the day and have higher stress levels compared to people that can work without distraction during the day.

When you talk of these external distractions in the workplace, that's also

RUSSEL HERNEMAN

"I like to leave the kids to their own devices."

Thinking back to the pandemic, I think a lot of people had difficulty focusing because so much was going on in the world around them.

something that is a huge cost to those people who are trying to focus, say, in a family environment. When a parent is at home and they have several children around, they're going to be constantly distracted. Now, you were talking about internal distractions as well. It's very easy to focus on problems associated with external distractions – mobile phones, this new busy life that we're leading – but humans have always been distracted by themselves, by their internal dialogue. Is this something that can be more of an issue for some people than it is for others?

There's a lot of neurodiversity. Some people are, by nature, very good at focusing and dealing with internal distractions. There are other people who tend to worry about things or perhaps have reason to worry about things. Thinking back to the pandemic, I think a lot of people had difficulty focusing because so much was going on in the world around them. So, yes, there are large individual differences, and within an individual there are differences from one period of your life to other periods in your life. When you have just had a newborn, you might have difficulty focusing not only because of tiredness, but also because you have things to worry about. Especially when you find your work not very motivating, concentration becomes extremely difficult even if you design your external world perfectly without distractions.

I supervise a lot of students and this is generally a sort of error that they make. They're behind schedule and they say, "Well, I'm going to go to a house in France and I'm going to work there for two weeks and I'm going to write my thesis all at once." It's never a success. They always come back, "Yeah, I did less than I expected," because it's not only your external environment but also the internal environment you have to take care of.

With internal distractions, do these tend to be of the negative variety? Of course, we have negative and positive thoughts, but are our negative thoughts, our fears, is this the kind of thing that tends to be more distracting?

Yes, absolutely. When our brain is not concentrating, we start a period of mind wandering in which our brain is on autopilot. We don't have anything in working memory at that moment. This is what you do, for instance, when you go for a walk in nature or when you're on your bike or taking a shower or doing the dishes, and your mind starts to wander. We know from studies that these mind-wandering episodes tend to have a negative nature. A lot of people worry when they're mind-wandering, and those are the same thoughts that pop up into your head when you're concentrating. So, when you're concentrating you're suppressing mind-wandering. 'A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind' was the title of a *Science* paper that was published a couple of years ago. I like the title. I recognise it myself. I'm generally more happy when I'm actively doing something than when I'm alone on my bike. I have a relatively positive life, I have two great kids, marriage, and such, but I also have stuff that I worry about. When I take a shower, when I'm on my bike, or when I'm running for example, these negative feelings pop up. For me it's a relief knowing that this is the case for a lot of people.

It reminds me of a quote from Blaise Pascal. He wrote that all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.

Yes, that's a beautiful one. There was an experiment a couple of years ago where they had people sit alone in a room except with some machine with which they could apply electric shocks. After 12 minutes, the majority of people gave themselves shocks. The main message of that study was: we prefer giving ourselves shocks than being alone with our own thoughts.

When it comes to concentration, with mind-wandering being one of the issues for a lot of people, if it does elicit negative thoughts and causes these problems, is there something that we can do to train ourselves to concentrate better? Are we able to improve our concentration levels? And I don't just mean turning off your smartphone, removing distractions, but actively training yourself to concentrate better?

First of all, I think we should embrace mind-wandering a bit more because mind-wandering is essential for our concentration span. You need to give the attention networks in the brain a break once in a while. However a lot of the time when people are taking a break, they do something that still requires their attention. They're using social media or they're listening to a podcast while they are walking outside. I've really learned that I should also have periods during the day when I'm mind-wandering because the mind-wandering allows my attention networks to regain their strength again and I'll be able to focus a lot better. So this is one: embrace mind-wandering, although it's sometimes negative. Of course, when it becomes too negative, you need to seek help.

Second point is, there's one training program, which has quite strong scientific evidence for its positive benefits on concentration, namely meditation. I'm quite sceptical, but I think the evidence is quite clear that mindfulness is good for your concentration, which if you think about, it makes sense. You focus your attention on a specific stimulus, internally or externally, and you need to keep your attention there. The moment you realise that your attention starts to wander, you bring attention back to its original task. This is exactly what concentration is.

One could argue that mindfulness is concentration, but boiled down to its bare essence. It makes you aware of what distraction is, that distraction is normal, and that it's something that can happen. It also makes you able to accept it, so you can bring your attention back to the original task again without too many negative thoughts about the distraction itself.

To be distracted from something implies that there is something else that's more worthwhile than the thing you're being distracted by. What is it that makes one thing worthwhile and the other thing a distraction? We talk a lot about smartphones and the media and entertainment, that all of this is a distraction for us, but perhaps they're being mislabelled and they are also something we should be concentrating on. What's really happening is that we're distracted from something that we don't really feel like doing too much – and then we actively choose to do this other more appealing task.

Yes, that's a good point. A lot of the things that we are distracted by are worthwhile, and apparently we want those. People install social media apps on their phone. I'm not against social media, I don't use them myself extensively, but I understand why people might use them. I do think it depends on the time of the day when you use them. If you're reading a book or you're working on a report or a presentation, this is not the time to be interacting with social media.

However, if I decide to do it at a moment in time that works for me, it might be valuable. Social media allows us to interact with the people around us. We keep our social network going,

One could argue that mindfulness is concentration, but then boiled down to its bare essence.

but I think to use it in the wrong way is when you have them around you the whole time, even during periods in which you should focus on something else. So I think it depends on the way we deal with it. Tech companies know exactly how to grab our attention and how to hold it. So you might find yourself in a not-so-conscious loophole where all of a sudden you are now looking at your Twitter timeline way too long. We don't have complete voluntary control over our attention.

We might be tricked into something that we don't want to be tricked by. A lot of the time, for instance, when I'm in the supermarket and I'm standing in line to pay for my food, I grab my phone automatically. This is a habit, and we know that performing habits is not always conscious. If you put your phone in your backpack and you turn it off, you now have to make a conscious decision to grab your phone. But a lot of the time we get distracted by attention grabbing media around us without a conscious decision, just out of a reflex, out of a habit. And I think that's something we want to prevent, and we do need to design the world so that we still have access to these things, but when we access them it's a conscious voluntary decision.

Unfortunately, with the profit motive, it's unlikely for that to happen anytime soon because our attention is worth a lot of money to many companies. If they can grab it, they can profit from it. It's easy to go down the doom and gloom path of thinking that our attention span is getting shorter and children's brains are getting scrambled. But is the amount of information and the number of distractions that children and teenagers are having to deal with, is this having some effect on their brains? Is it affecting their ability to focus? Is there any research on this?

That is a very complicated question because there isn't a lot of research. A lot of the research that's out there is correlational. We know that students who interact with social media also have lower grades. But this could also be due to the fact that these students already have difficulty concentrating and therefore use their mobile phone more. What I do believe, though, and I think this is definitely not a stretch, is that whatever you learn early on in your life, gives you preferences later in life. For instance, if you want to learn how to play tennis, it's good to start doing that as early as your body allows you to do it.

I think this holds for a lot of tasks that require cognition. Think of reading, writing, and giving presentations. This is why we start school early in life. So although I cannot direct you to a study showing that people that have better concentration spans when they're younger also have better concentration spans when they're older, and this is due to the fact that they interact with social media not so extensively, I do think we know that cognitive abilities can be trained early on in life. So, yes, I am relatively confident and I think we should not take the risk. I think we should make sure that people early in their life have periods of longer concentration, at school, in the house, just to be sure that at least we have created a situation so that they will, hopefully, be able to do the same thing when they're older. If you compare it to a muscle that you need to train, then it's good to start training as early as possible.

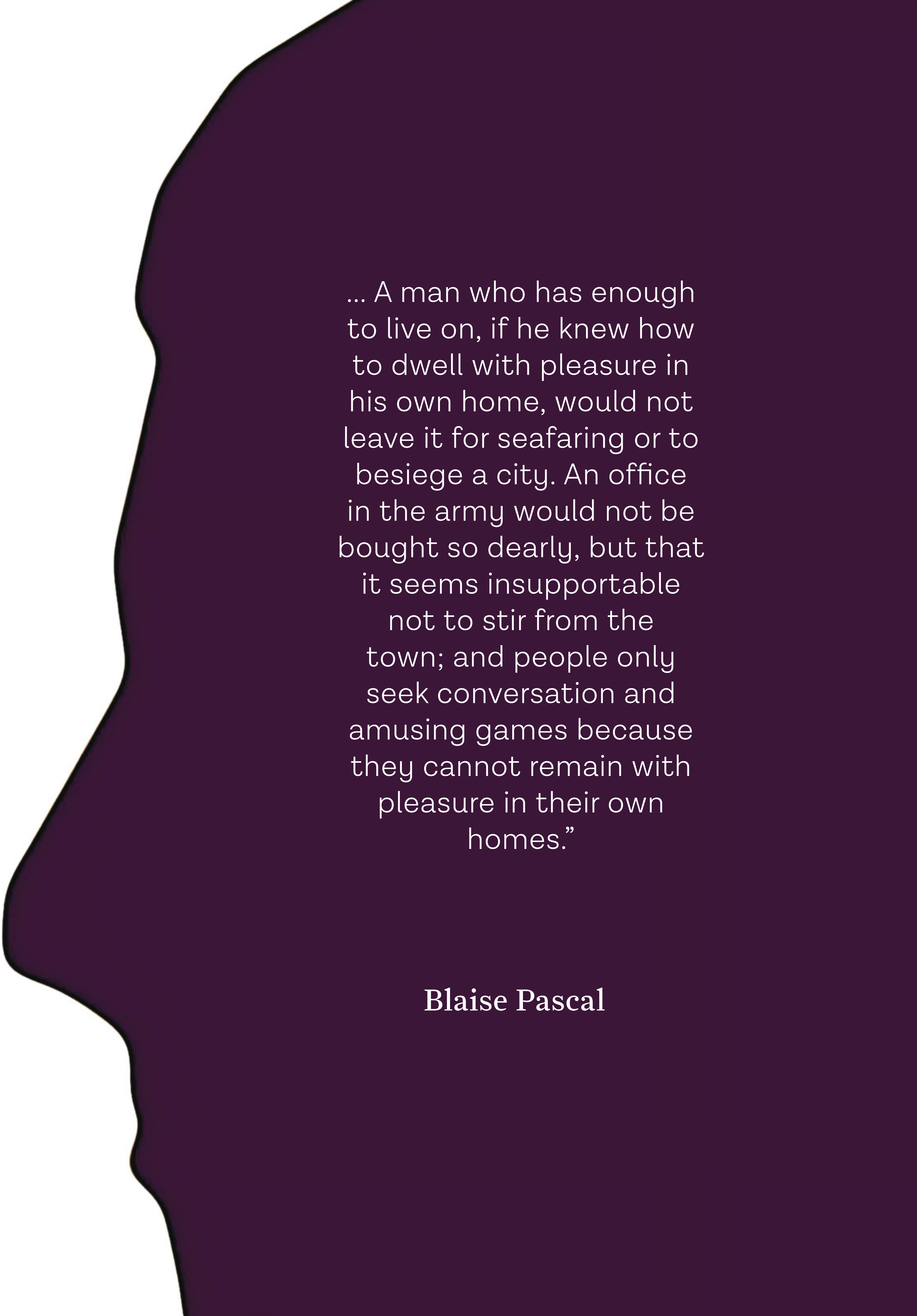
I've got one last question. What you think the future holds for us and for our brains when it comes to concentration and distraction over the coming decades? Do you think we're going to be able to learn and adapt to the increasing information load that we're getting? Or do you think we'll succumb to it and just live in this permanently distracted state?

It's a good point. I would like students and my children to be able to read a book because I think it's worthwhile. We see already that literacy rates are going down. Young people take in information differently than older generations. We see that Spotify has changed how we listen to music. Netflix has changed how we watch television, and I don't think we can go back.

Information transfer will be quicker. If you look at the television shows that we watched when we were young, if you show them to the kids right now, they fall asleep within two minutes. It's so slow. I do think this is a generation that will hopefully, because they grow up with social media, deal with social media in a better way, that they gain some awareness. You see some first initiatives already where people don't want to have social media and make the decision, "I'm going to take control over my attention again." I do see those movements and I think that's going to be interesting. In The Netherlands there's now a debate about social media in schools and what to do with mobile phones in schools.

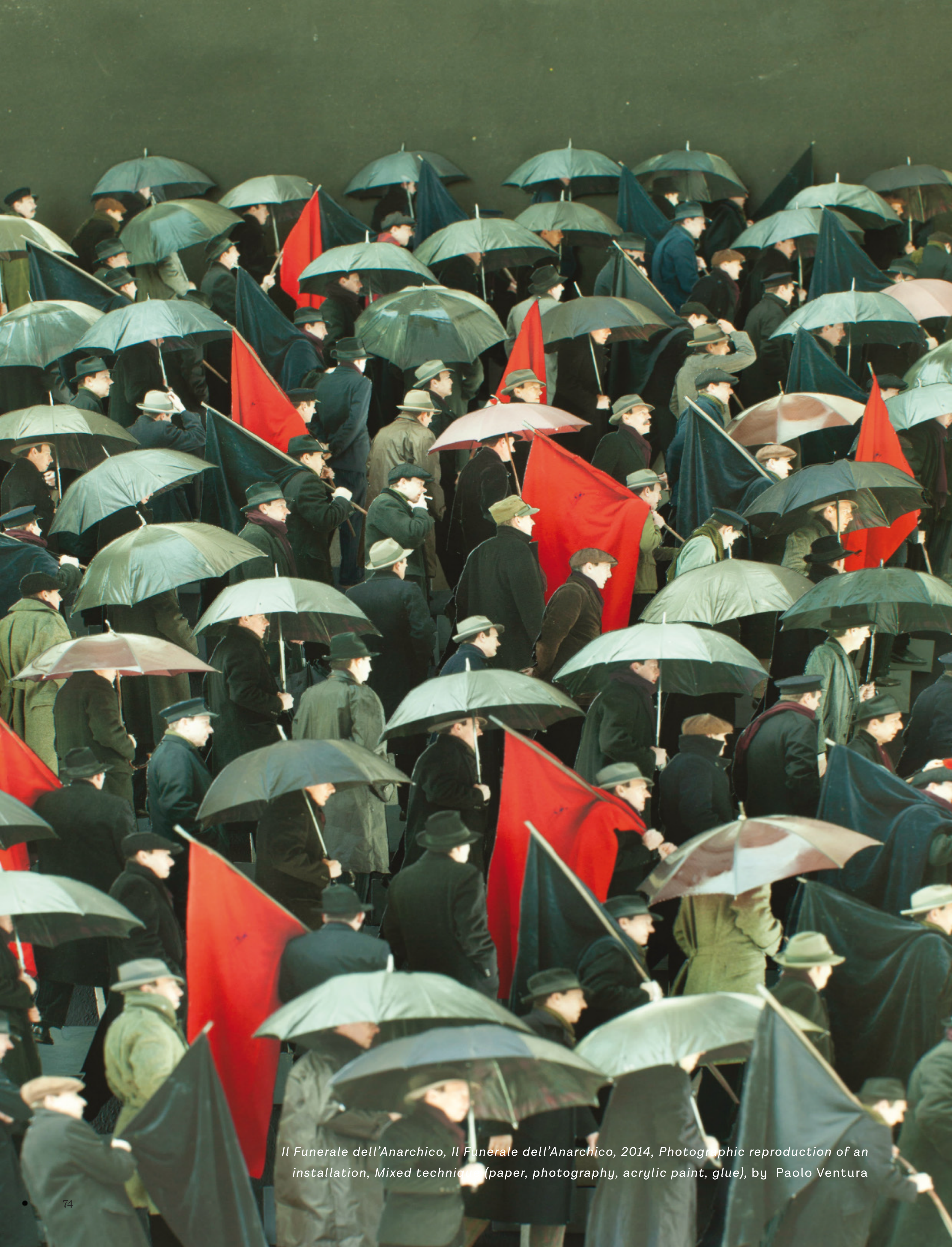
We just should think consciously about what we attend to. Sometimes I have a discussion with my kids about whether something is worth their attention. When they're watching a video and they have to watch an advertisement first, I'm asking them the question, "*Is this worth your attention?*". I think it's good that you also have this edition of your magazine because it is something we need to start talking about. In the end, attention is the solution. We just have to design our environment in such a way that we do allow these longer periods of concentration to happen. ◼

“When I have set myself now and then to consider the various distractions of men, the toils and dangers to which they expose themselves in the court or the camp, whence arise so many quarrels and passions, such daring and often such evil exploits, etc., I have discovered that all the misfortunes of men arise from one thing only, that they are unable to stay quietly in their own room. …



… A man who has enough to live on, if he knew how to dwell with pleasure in his own home, would not leave it for seafaring or to besiege a city. An office in the army would not be bought so dearly, but that it seems insupportable not to stir from the town; and people only seek conversation and amusing games because they cannot remain with pleasure in their own homes.”

Blaise Pascal



Il Funerale dell'Anarchico, Il Funerale dell'Anarchico, 2014, Photographic reproduction of an installation, Mixed technique (paper, photography, acrylic paint, glue), by Paolo Ventura by André Dao

Signal/noise

Contemporary life in post-industrial societies is beset by a curious, insidious paradox. On the one hand, we live and work in the knowledge economy, where information is the world's most valuable commodity: data, it is said, is the new oil. On the other hand, we have never been more swamped by information – by never-ending streams of messages, emails, advertisements, alerts, and notifications. This deluge of data gets more overwhelming as the scale of organisation increases: businesses are inundated with constant and fine-grained data about the behaviour of customers and potential customers; governments are confronted with everything from longitudinal studies of their citizens' attitudes to instant data captured by physical sensors to track people's movements through cities.

The paradox is encapsulated by the idea of 'information overload': in an information society, we need a great deal of reliable, timely information to make decisions. Yet too much information is paralysing. Herbert Simon, the American psychologist and computer scientist who coined the term in the 1960s, described information overload as occurring when a decision-maker is faced with "a wealth of information [which] creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it". For a business or government, that might mean that important issues are missed because the decision-maker is focused on the wrong bit of information. On an individual level, information overload might look like anxiety and indecision – or that mild headache you get every time you open your inbox.

The solution to the paradox sounds straight-forward enough. To avoid information overload, you just have to learn to focus on what's important. Well – obviously. The problem, of course, is how to tell what's significant, and what's mere distraction.

An increasingly popular framework for deciding what to focus on is the binary of signal and noise. The binary is drawn from the fields of engineering and computer science, where the signal-to-noise ratio is a measurement of how well a particular 'channel' of communication carries the desired signal compared to background noise. Think of a patchy phone call or a lagging video: the signal – the voices on the call, or the image in the video – is getting overwhelmed by noise – electronic interference and digital glitches. The signal-to-noise ratio of these channels – the phone line or the internet connection – is poor.

Deployed loosely as a metaphor, signal and noise simply become synonyms for useful information and distracting information, respectively. Productivity gurus advise us to filter out the 'noise' of emails and social media in the morning to focus on the 'signal' of what you should really be doing. Used in this way, the framework seems both commonsensical and not particularly helpful. After all, almost anything could be defined as noise: oh, everything X says is just noise, I'm better off ignoring them. But perhaps what X has to say is not a distraction at all – it's just something you want to avoid thinking about.

So much for the signal/noise framework when it comes to personal productivity. But it has far more application – and far more significant implications – in the spheres of business and governance. This should not come as a surprise: the field of information theory, from which the signal/noise binary is derived, was largely developed within and around the US military-industrial complex following World War II. In that context, the question of how to maximise signal to noise might determine whether a military command gets

Technologies such as data dashboards don’t solve the problem of information overload so much as shift the problem elsewhere.

to the frontline – or indeed, if a missile hits its target.

The utility of thinking about the communication of information in terms of signal and noise is that it is extremely efficient. That efficiency is achieved by flattening the problem of human communication into a question of mathematics. This is apparent from the very outset of the field: Claude Shannon, an American mathematician, inaugurated the study of information theory with his 1948 article ‘A Mathematical Theory of Communication’. There, Shannon argued that while messages have meaning, ‘these semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem’. That is, the specific message to be communicated is less important than the fact that any given message is one of a set of possible messages. The engineering problem, from Shannon’s perspective, is to design a communication system that can operate for every possibly desired message, while keeping superfluous possibilities as low as possible (because these unnecessary possibilities produce noise).

To be overly simplistic, let’s say that a communication system might need to communicate two different messages: fire the missile, or don’t fire the missile. The system has to be designed such that either of the two messages can be sent – and no others (or as few as possible). A system that uses the English alphabet and natural language would allow the user to send the required messages: say, ‘fire’ and ‘no fire’. But that would be inefficient because of the myriad superfluous possibilities: ‘fyre’, ’noofire’ and so on. All these unnecessary possibilities introduce potential noise, getting in the way of a clear signal. The more efficient solution, and the one Shannon elected for, is to use a binary system of 1s and 0s – in this case, 1 for ‘fire the missile’ and 0 for ‘don’t fire the missile’. That way, all desired possibilities are accommodated, and all undesired ones – all the noise – are impossible.

Shannon’s crucial insight was that form could be divorced from content – that the 1s and 0s of a digital communication system, for instance, need have nothing to do with any intended meaning. From this insight, the modern information society was built, with ever more sophisticated systems delivering us ever more information, ever more efficiently.

One such ultra-efficient channel is the data dashboard. Conceptually modelled on the dashboard of a car or the cockpit of an aeroplane, data dashboards are visual interfaces that integrate a range of data visualisations – graphs, maps, social media feeds and so on – onto a single screen. These dashboards are ubiquitous, helping users track everything from financial performance to personal health to student progress. And they are super-efficient because they allow a user to grasp a complex situation in a single glance, rather than having to comb through multiple sources of data.

For instance, municipal governments have started using data dashboards to produce so-called ‘smart cities’, where sensors placed throughout the urban environment – combined with data gleaned from inhabitants’ online and mobile activity – produce streams of data that are arranged into neat, comprehensible dashboards. In a single glance, a city official can – so the story goes – see if there is an uptick in crime in a certain area, where the traffic is heavy, or what kinds of council complaints are trending.

We have seemingly come a long way from a ‘1’ to fire a missile. But in spite of their relative sophistication, data dashboards are really just a further development of the drive towards maximising signal. After all, data dashboards promise to manage and minimise information overload by communicating as much useful information as possible, while erasing or hiding the ‘noise’. Everything you see in the dashboard is all signal – that’s the point.

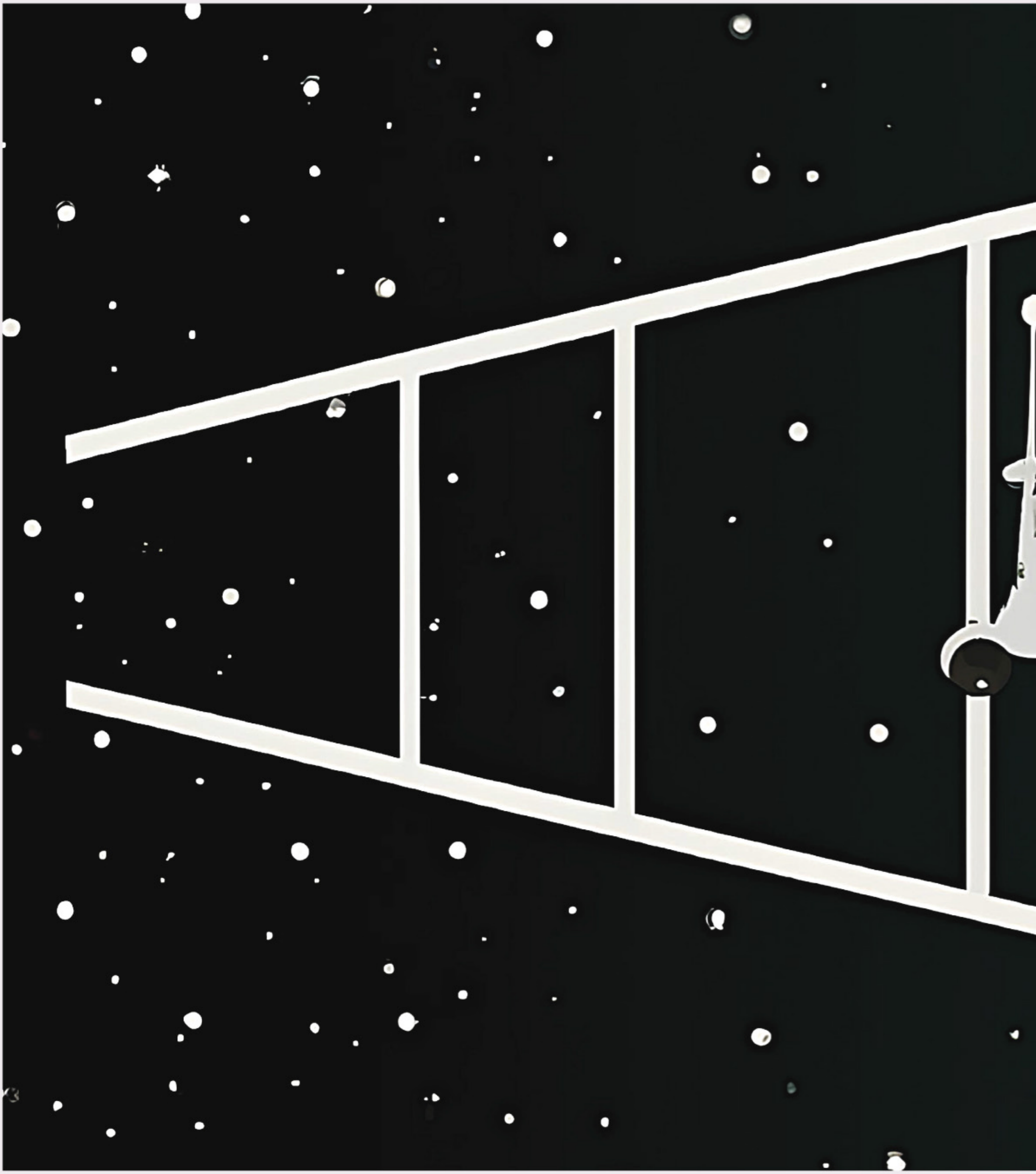
What is left out, relegated to the margins as mere noise? To return to the smart city, data dashboards exclude from view people’s everyday experience. True, those experiences will often be a distraction for the smooth functioning of the bureaucracy.

And what is lost if the city’s life is reduced to the hyper focus of digital sensors? Indeed, one could say that technologies such as data dashboards don’t solve the problem of information overload so much as shift the problem elsewhere, into the design of the technologies themselves. We don’t have to decide if something is a distraction, just noise – but this is only because the channel already decided for us.

> “It seemed like there was one deeper level of ‘distraction’ to contend with: the sort of distraction that would threaten our ability to know and define what our goals and values are in the first place.”

James Williams

Artwork: *Circles in a Circle*, 1923, by Wassily Kandinsky



The Astronomer

From *Aesop's Fables*

An Astronomer used to go out at night to observe the stars. One evening, as he wandered through the suburbs with his whole attention fixed on the sky, he fell accidentally into a deep well. While he lamented and bewailed his sores and bruises, and cried loudly for help, a neighbour ran to the well, and learning what had happened said: “Hark ye, old fellow, why, in striving to pry into what is in heaven, do you not manage to see what is on earth?’

A version of this tale first appears in Plato's *Theaetetus*:

Socrates: Why, take the case of Thales, Theodorus. While he was studying the stars and looking upwards, he fell into a pit, and a neat, witty Thracian servant girl jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet. The same jest applies to all who pass their lives in philosophy.

by Tom Chatfield

Deep distraction

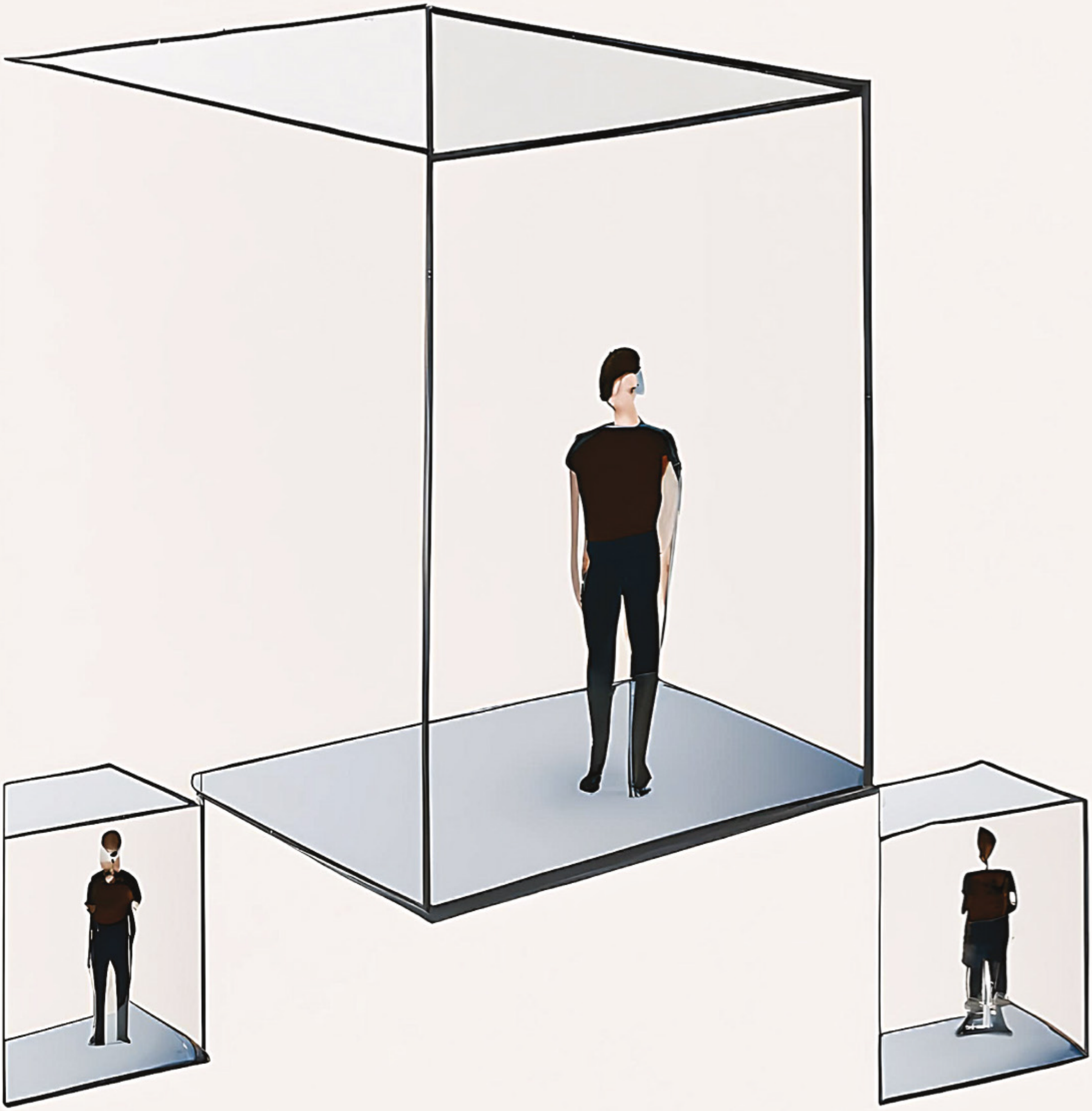
Last year, I attended a conference at a country house hotel that boasted a slightly battered baby grand in its lounge. From the moment I saw it, I was desperate to play – and I found my moment during an afternoon pause between sessions. I should have been networking, mingling, sharing ideas. Instead I sneaked to the lounge and started to improvise (very) loosely in the style of Oscar Peterson. I kept doing so until, eventually, it became clear that the lounge was about to be used for an event, at which point I crept away.

I'm a decent pianist, but nothing special by the standards of those who make music for a living. So why are pianos important to me? One reason is that I find making music much more relaxing than mere inaction. It stills the chatter of ideas and arguments in my head. By immersing myself in notes, harmonies, and forms, I achieve a blissful distraction from whatever is weighing me down. Something about the mixed conscious and unconscious execution of motions I've practised for thousands of hours replenishes a deep part of myself.

I'm tempted to call piano-playing a meditative activity. If it is, however, it's predicated upon action rather than stillness: upon the active deployment of attention away from whatever is blocking or bothering me. This is distraction's central paradox. If something unwelcome keeps calling me away from an important task, I resent it deeply. It's even worse if part of me is constantly drawn towards the thing I ought to be ignoring (feel free to insert your own social media reference here). Yet I find that maintaining engagement, energy, and productivity over any length of time requires variety and respite: the cultivation of 'good' distractions that can extricate me from emotional and imaginative cul-de-sacs.

What's going on? In general, any activity that fully occupies mind and body – that offers a sense of 'flow', in the famous coinage of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – potentially creates a space within which impasses can resolve themselves, or at least evolve into something more tractable. Pianos aren't the only option. I also hate to sit still for too long, and find that a good writing day tends to involve either intense exercise or many miles of walking. I don't have any special athletic talent; indeed, achieving a particular goal would be beside the point. It's just that mental focus often lies on the far side of physical exertion.

Various forms of exercise or performance, then, offer both intrinsic and instrumental satisfactions. But there's also something else going on, for me, when it comes to music. For a start, I struggle with small talk and rooms full of strangers. Like quite a few introverts, I'm unworried about presenting or performing in front of a large audience, but terrified by the prospect of mingling and chatting afterwards. For as long as I can remember, I have found that the happiest place for me to be in



any crowded setting is behind a musical instrument. Similarly, my favourite way to meet new people is to make music with them. There's a joy to this connection that sidesteps triviality and misunderstanding – not to mention the difficulty I have retaining names and faces. With music, you get to be in the moment of making, together. You get to be fully present.

My relationship with piano-playing, in other words, is intimately bound up with who I am – and the negotiations I have learned to conduct with my own limitations. It connects me to what I think of as my full or 'real' self. When it's going well, the sounds I make simply are what I need them to be. By contrast, words like the ones you're reading right now are slippery, shifting things. I feel amazed and privileged that I can make a living by writing and thinking. But words are also constantly escaping me. No matter how many times I re-rewrite a passage, it never entirely expresses what I mean – perhaps because I'm never quite sure of this myself, and perhaps because "I" am a moving target. As David Hume knew, the self is more like a song than a story.

Hume aside, the most important philosophical accounts of distraction and attention I've encountered are those offered by Zen Buddhism. "Where your attention goes, your life goes," writes the Zen and Taoist Qigong teacher Christian Dillo in his book *The Path of Aliveness*. "Your entire life is a dance of attention." To extend Dillo's metaphor, I view welcome distractions as fresh rhythms, partners, or melodies: sources of energy and excitement. Unwelcome distractions, by contrast, are mental and bodily blocks. To dance is to align yourself with something unfolding. And the opposite of a dance is a not a stumble but stasis: standing immobile as the world wheels by.

Within this analogy there is, I think, an insight into distraction in its most pernicious form: into a sadder and stranger diminishment than its name implies. Here is how, at the start of *The Path of Aliveness*, Dillo describes the malaise that can follow when someone becomes alienated from their own moment-by-moment experiences of the world. "Being biologically alive doesn't necessarily mean we feel alive… our own aliveness can feel like a distant land, even though it is where we are already at home."

One of his students, Dillo continues, outwardly appears well-adjusted, normal, and successful. Yet he is haunted by a low-level anxiety that leaves him feeling like a spectator within his own existence. "The world he lives in appears as if behind a glass wall. The wall, however, is not just between him and the world but also goes right through his own person. Emotions exist, but they are like animals in a zoo. Some appear likely completely unknown creatures; others would seem scary had he not learned how to quickly put them behind bars. Being only a visitor to his own inner life leaves him feeling flat."

Unable to attend to what matters most – to the gamut of his sensations and emotions, from fear and loss to hope to joy – Dillo's student lives a half-life of disjointed moments. He is distracted from the very business of living: from fully inhabiting his own experiences.

We all, I think, face a version of this deep distraction at some point in our lives. Sometimes, attention's dance becomes a trudge. The future seems a series of obstacles to be endured; the present a mere succession of semi-engagements. Sometimes, it is painful to be reminded about the very things that make us feel and live most deeply: music, laughter, intimacy, beauty.

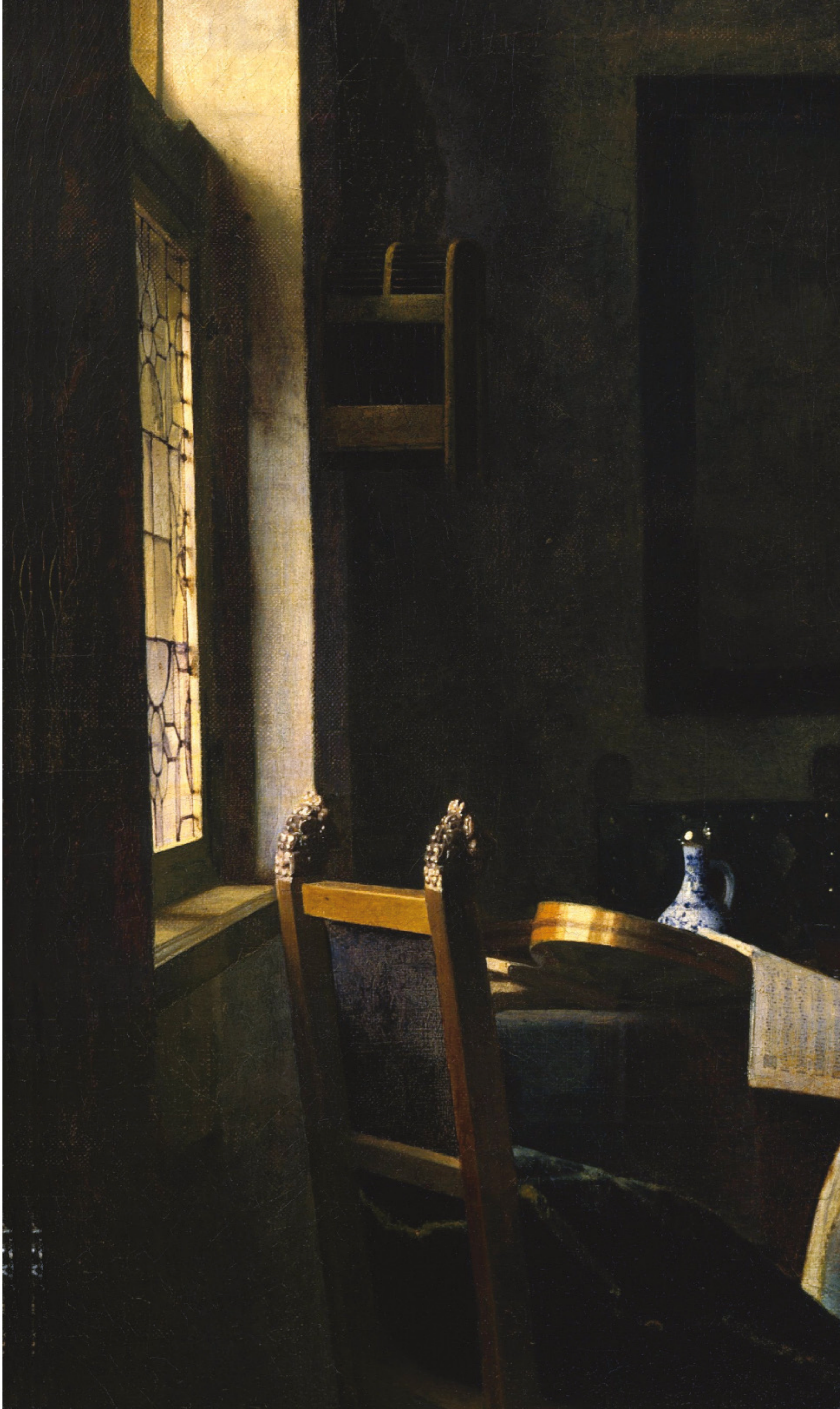
Ultimately, however, to be distracted from our inner lives is also to withdraw from the world: to exist without attending to the greatest gift we share. The mind is nothing but its own dance. ▪

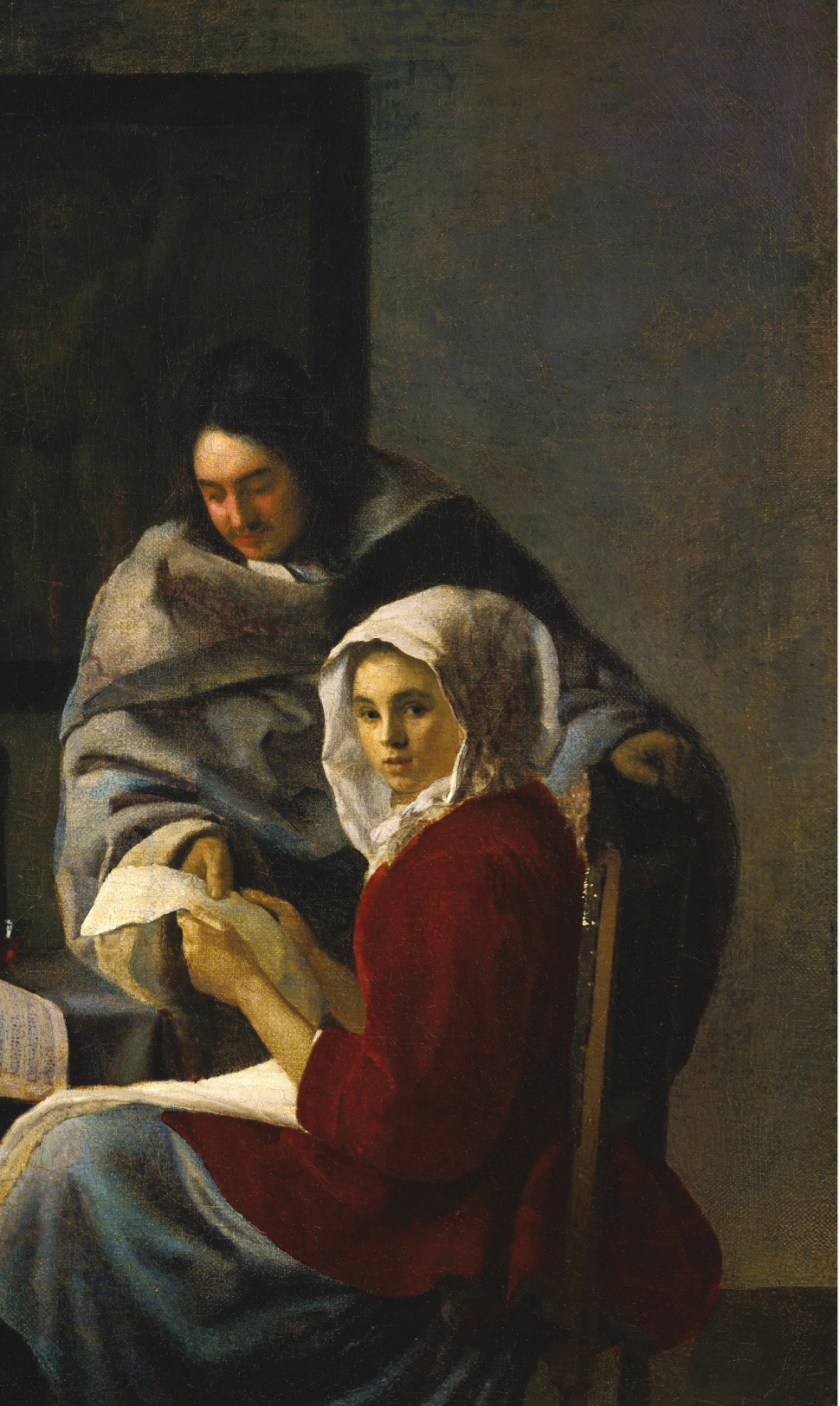
I view welcome distractions as fresh rhythms, partners, or melodies: sources of energy and excitement. Unwelcome distractions, by contrast, are mental and bodily blocks.

“Attention makes the genius; all learning, fancy,
and science depend upon it. Newton traced back
his discoveries to its unwearied employment.
It builds bridges, opens new worlds, and heals
diseases; without it taste is useless, and the
beauties of literature are unobserved.”

Robert Aris Willmott

Lithographie Blau, 1922, by Wassily Kandinsky





Girl Interrupted at Her Music, 1660–61, by Johannes Vermeer

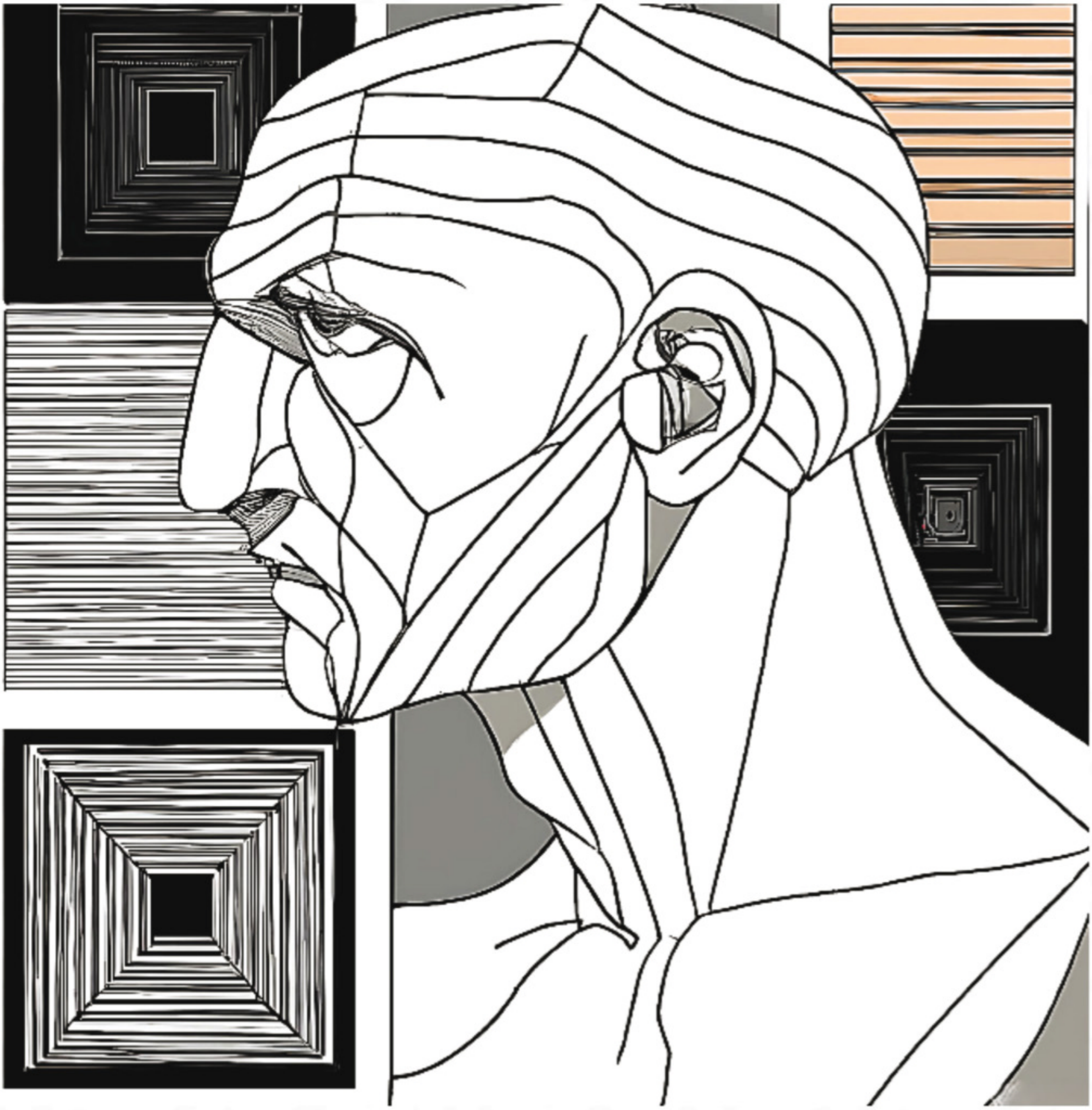
By Antonia Case

Laser-sharp focus

In fourth century Greece, a young Athenian named Demosthenes built himself an underground study, and shaved one half of his head so he couldn't go out in public. The young Demosthenes entered his subterranean world and there he would remain, oftentimes without intermission, for two or three months.

As a boy, Demosthenes had a speech impairment, an "indistinct utterance and shortness of breath", according to Greek philosopher Plutarch, that caused his sentences to be broken and disjointed, making it difficult for him to be understood. The first time Demosthenes made a speech in the public assembly, his stammering pronunciation caused him much distress, so much so that he sought the advice of an actor and set up a disciplined routine of practice. In his underground study, Demosthenes practiced diction, voice, and gestures in front of a large mirror. He studied the speeches of great orators of the past. To correct his stammer, it's said that he spoke with pebbles in his mouth. Tellingly, today, Demosthenes is remembered as one of the finest orators of classical Greece, if not the best. His speeches are regarded as literary and rhetorical masterpieces.

When we wish to do something, and do it well, we need focused attention. We may regard attention as energy, and when it's directed at a single point it can become sharp as a laser. Recently, a group of physicists from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln created light in a laboratory that's one billion times brighter than the surface of the Sun. They focused a laser beam intensely, striking a single electron with 1,000 photons at a time (under normal conditions, one electron would scatter one photon of light at a time). Interestingly, the scientists discovered that when a super bright light is focused upon an object, it can change the object's colour and shape, in other words transform the object into something else. "It's as if things appear differently as you turn up the brightness of the light, which is not something you normally would experience," commented UNL physicist Donald Umstadter. "(An object) normally



becomes brighter, but otherwise, it looks just like it did with a lower light level. But here, the light is changing (the object's) appearance."

The music composer, too, can turn a series of music notes into a heart-rending symphony, colliding sounds together to create a rhythm or melody never heard before by human ears. But to do so the composer requires time and space – to ponder, pause, and reflect. The composer cannot produce a masterpiece while simultaneously watching a baseball game, for example.

But in our modern world, attaining peace and quiet has become a rare commodity indeed. For starters, there are many more of us today than in any time in history – packed into smaller and smaller housing spaces, little rooms full of noise, family members tripping over each other's thoughts – traffic noise at the window. You walk anywhere and you are accosted by visual and auditory stimuli – not to mention the distraction we voluntarily heap upon ourselves via our phones and computers. With more people desirous of capturing our attention too – 'watch me, look at me' – it's getting tougher to shape a life based upon one's own intentions.

But focus and attention are critical if you want to get something specific out of life. If you want to be good at something – really good – then you need to have laser-beam focus to speed up the learning process. "Hardly any faculty is more important for the intellectual progress of man than attention," writes Charles Darwin.

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin relates a conversation he once had with a man from the Zoological Gardens. This man spoke about an animal trainer, a man who trained monkeys to act in plays. The trainer used to purchase the monkeys from the Zoological Society for five pounds each, but he offered to double the price for one monkey if he could keep three or four for a few days to assess which one was the best. But how could he know so soon whether one monkey was going to be a better actor than another? The animal trainer said that it all depended on their power of attention. "If, when he was talking and explaining anything to a monkey, its attention was easily distracted, as by a fly on the wall or other trifling object, the case was hopeless," writes Darwin. "If he tried by punishment to make an inattentive monkey act, it turned sulky. On the other hand, a monkey which carefully attended to him could always be trained."

It reminds me of a conversation I once had with a top tennis coach. "What makes a tennis star?" I asked him. "You come across hundreds of children, and they all want to learn to play tennis. What is it about the one that rises to tennis greatness – what do they have that the others don't?"

The tennis coach said that all children receive advice on such things as how to add top spin to their forehand, or how to master the backhand slice; but the child tennis prodigy will be the one who can apply that information the fastest. At the early stages, it's a race – and whoever learns the fastest supercharges their practice.

Not surprisingly, the studies are rolling in – across psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience – that being distracted while you learn has quite a detrimental effect. Learn something while you text message, track live cricket scores, or listen to podcasts, for example, and you will suffer a series of

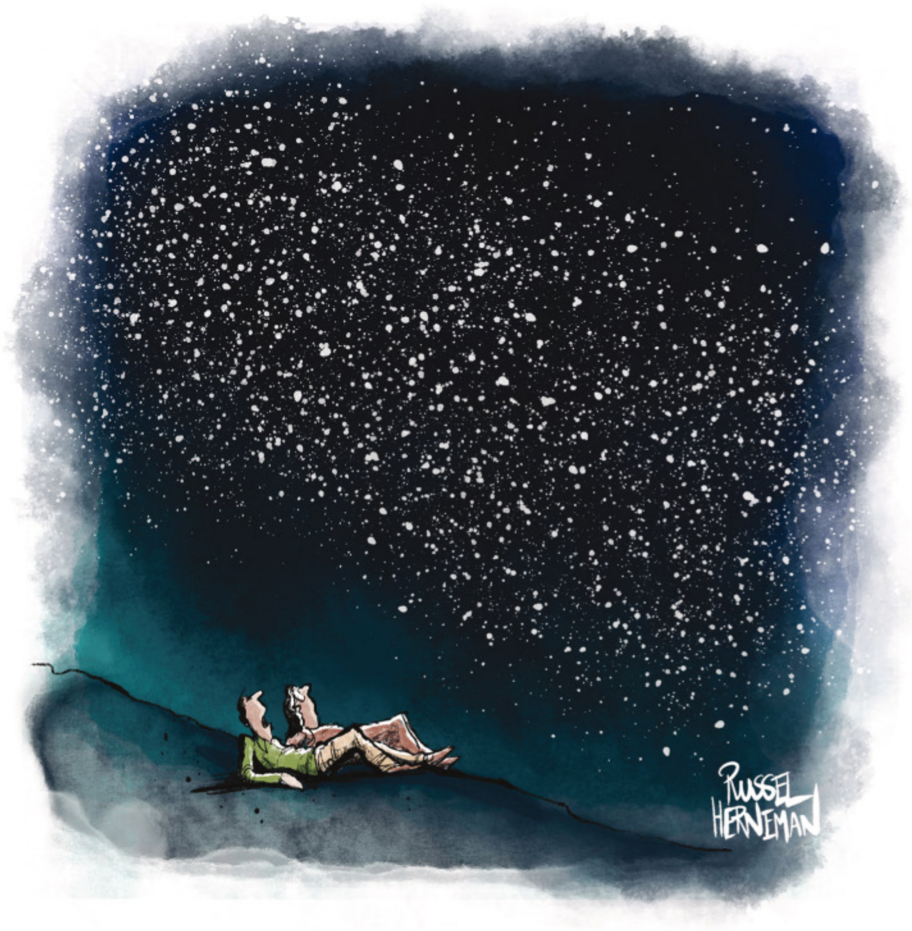
A good way to think of distraction is like diffused light, which by definition can't focus on a sharp point.

blows to the head. Not only will it take you longer to complete tasks and your performance will suffer, distraction is mentally draining on your poor brain. If you're distracted while learning, you're less likely to recall the information later, or transfer the learning to new contexts.

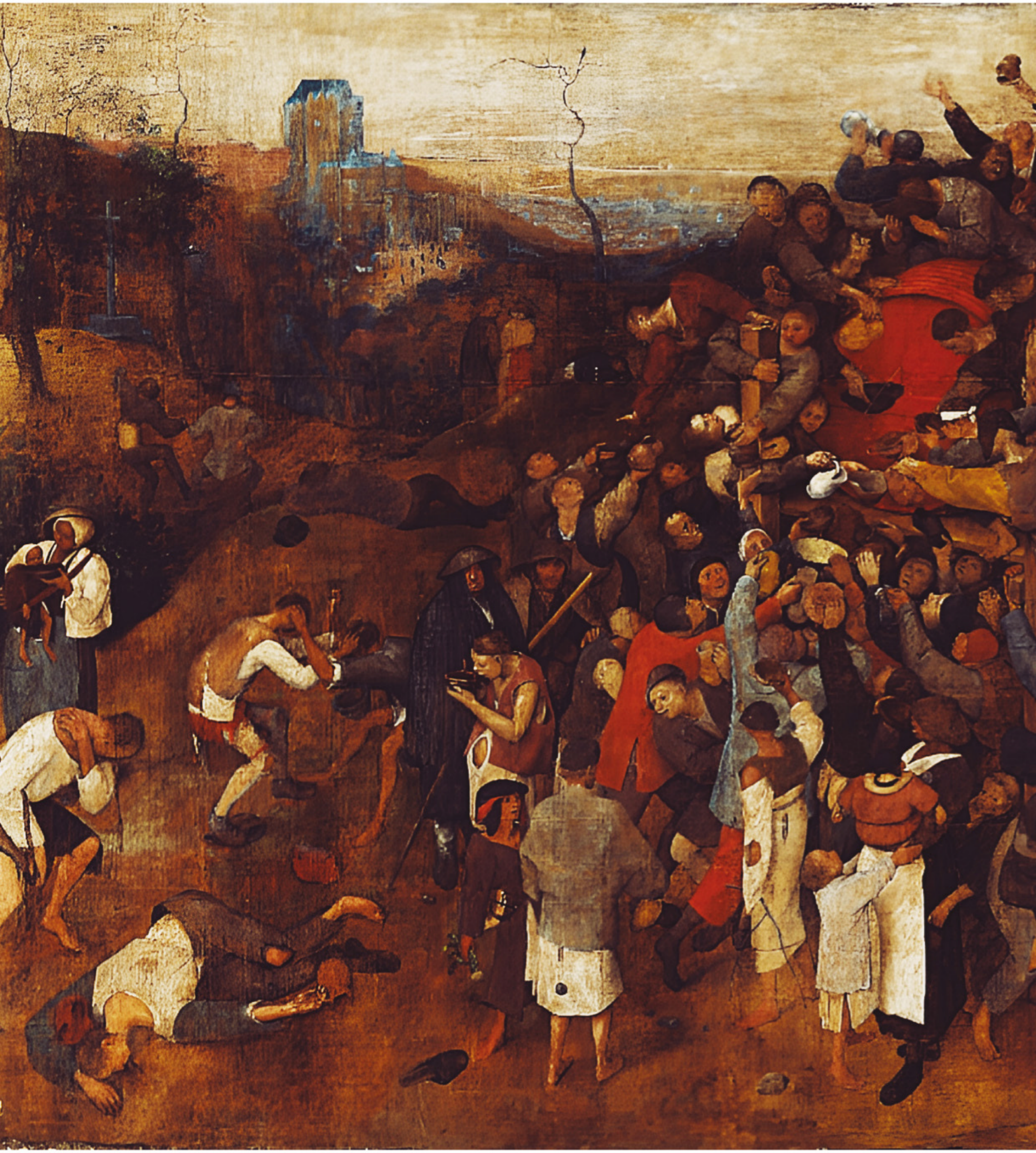
Curiously, when this tennis coach trains children on the court, he is almost imperceptible in his muted clothing, restrained gestures, and soft voice. The indoor court where the training is held is almost silent – no music, no flickering television screens, no wind, or sunlight, or traffic noise – nothing to distract, just the pop pop of the ball as the sound echoes off stadium walls.

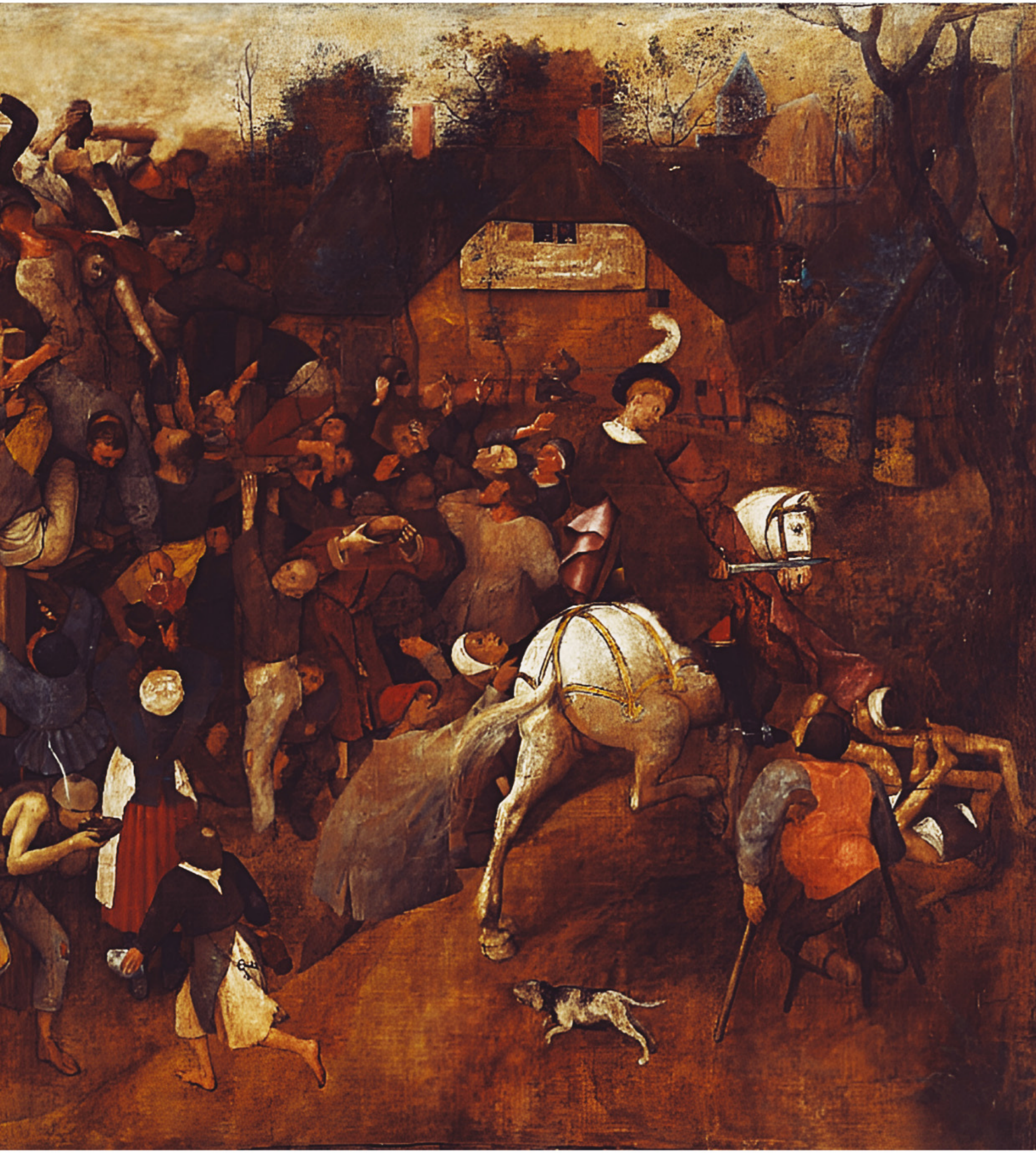
Demosthenes, one of the greatest ancient Greek orators, stepped off the pedestrian level of foot traffic and headed into the depths of the underground to accelerate his skills in oration. These young tennis players, too, are fine-tuning their top spin and slice in an auditorium-sized space of minimal distraction. A good way to think of distraction is like diffused light, which by definition can't focus on a sharp point. Laser light, in contrast, can travel hundreds of metres without being scattered.

A laser-beam focus upon anything we deem important or worthy in our life can be truly transformative.



"Just think, for every star there's a message notification."





The Wine of Saint Martin's Day, 1565-68, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

THE LAND OF DISTRACTION

By Maggie Jackson

I think we're beginning to see a time of darkness when, amid a plethora of high-tech connectivity, one-quarter of Americans say they have no close confidante, more than double the number thirty years ago. It's a darkening time when we think togetherness means keeping one eye, hand, or ear on our gadgets, ever ready to tune into another channel of life, when we begin to turn to robots to tend to the sick and the old, when doctors listen to patients on average for just eighteen seconds before interrupting, and when two-fifths of children eight and under live in homes where the television is kept on all or most of the time, an environment linked to attention deficiencies. We should be concerned when we sense that short-term thinking in the workplace eclipses intellectual pattern making, and when we're staking our cultural memory largely on digital data that is disappearing at astounding rates. We should worry when attention slips through our fingers.

For nothing is more central to creating a flourishing society built upon learning, contentment, caring, morality, reflection, and spirit than attention. As humans, we are formed to pay attention. Without it, we simply would not survive. Just as our respiration or circulatory systems are made up of multiple parts, so attention encompasses three 'networks' related to different aspects of awareness, focus, and planning. In a nutshell, 'alerting' makes us sensitive to incoming stimuli, while the 'orienting' network helps us select information from among the millions of sensations we receive from the world, voluntarily or in reaction to our surroundings. A baby's first job is to hone these skills, which are akin to 'awareness' and 'focus', respectively. In a class of its own, however, is the executive network, the system of attention responsible for complex cognitive and emotional operations and especially for resolving conflicts between different areas of the brain. (We fire up four separate areas of the brain just to solve a simple word recognition problem, such as coming up with a use for the word *hammer*.) All three networks are crucial and often work together, and without strong skills of attention, we are buffeted by the world and hindered in our capacity to grow and even to enjoy life. People who focus well report feeling less fear, frustration, and sadness day to day, partly because they can literally deploy their attention away from negatives in life. In contrast, attentional problems are one of the main impediments to attaining 'flow', the deep sense of contentment that people find when they are stretching themselves to meet a challenge. Without the symphonic conductor of attention, the music of the brain disintegrates into cacophony.

Attention also tames our inner beast. Primates that receive training in attention become less aggressive. One of attention's highest forms is 'effortful control', which involves the ability to shift focus deliberately, engage in planning, and regulate one's impulses. Six- and seven-year-olds who score high in tests of this skill are more empathetic and less aggressive. Moreover, effortful control is integral to developing a conscience, researchers are discovering. In order to put back the stolen cookie, you must attend to your uneasy feelings, the action itself, and the abstract moral principles – then make the right response. All in all, attention is key to both our free will as individuals and our ability to subordinate ourselves to a greater good. The Oxford English Dictionary defines attention as "the act, fact or state of attending or giving heed; earnest direction of the mind," and secondarily as "practical consideration, observant care, notice." The word is rooted in the Latin words *ad* and *tendere*, meaning to "stretch toward", implying effort and intention. Even the phrase 'attention span' literally means a kind of bridge, a reaching across in order to widen one's horizons. Attention is not always effortful, but it carries us toward our highest goals, however we define them. A culture that settles for numb distraction cannot shape its future.

This morning, I sat in the library trying to harness my thoughts, but like runaway horses, they would not be reined in. We missed the first birthday of a baby whose parents are two of our closest friends, and I stewed about that for a while. Someone I interviewed for my newspaper column was peeved that an editor hadn't confirmed this evening's photo shoot, and a flurry of e-mails ensued. A man outside my study room made a long, illicit phone call and gestured threateningly when I asked him to stop. The old water pipes hissed in a new, odd way. I have never thought of myself as easily distracted, although I always have had an Olympic capacity for daydreaming, failing to complete my sentences, and slips of the tongue. (Go put on your pyjamas, I'll tell my daughter at noon, when I really mean bathing suit.) A friend generously diagnoses me as having "too many words" in my head. But perhaps the ultimate weak spot in my own capacity for focus is that I'm observant and 'sensitive' – a label I grew to hate as a child. I notice much of the ceaseless swirl of social intonations, bodily signals, and facial expressions around me. Even in the relative quiet of the library, the world tends to come rushing in, jumbling and splashing about inside me, a restless sea.

Yet isn't that essentially the starting point of attention? Attention is a process of taking in, sorting and shaping, planning, and decision making – a mental and emotional forming and kneading of the bread of life. The first two forms of attention – alertness and orienting – allow us to sense and respond to our environment, while the third and highest network of executive attention is needed to make ultimate sense of our world. Our ability to attend is partly genetic, yet also dependent upon a nurturing environment and how willing we are to reach for the highest levels of this skill, just as a naturally gifted athlete who lacks the opportunity, encouragement, and sheer will to practice can never master a sport. Today, our virtual, split-screen, and nomadic era is eroding opportunities for

"People who focus well report feeling less fear, frustration, and sadness day to day, partly because they can literally deploy their attention away from negatives in life."

deep focus, awareness, and reflection. As a result, we face a real risk of societal decline. But there is much room for hope, for attention can be trained, taught, and shaped, a discovery that offers the key to living fully in a tech-saturated world. We need not waste our potential for reaching the heights of attention. We don't have to settle for lives mired in detachment, fragmentation, diffusion. A renaissance of attention is within our grasp.

I didn't set out to write about attention. I was curious why so many Americans are deeply dissatisfied with life, feeling stressed, and often powerless to shape their futures in a country of such abundant resources. At first, I sought clues in the past, assuming that lessons from the first high-tech era – the heyday of the telegraph, cinema, and railway – could teach us how to better manage our own shifting experiences of space and time. Instead, I discovered that our gadgets are bringing to a climax the changes seeded in these first revolutions. Is this a historical turning point, a "hinge of history", in Thomas Cahill's words? In researching this next question, I discovered stunning similarities between past dark ages and our own era. At the same time, I began studying the astonishing discoveries made just in our own generation about the nature and workings of attention. As I explored these seemingly unrelated threads, I realised that they formed a tapestry: the story of what happens when we allow our powers of attention to slip through our fingers. Realising this loss is intriguing. Considering the consequences is alarming.

When a civilisation wearies, notes Cahill, a confidence based on order and balance is lost, and without such anchors, people begin to return to an era of shadows and fear. God-like amid our five hundred television channels and three hundred choices of cereal, are we failing to note the creeping arrival of a time of impermanence and uncertainty? Mesmerised by streams of media-borne eye candy and numbed by our faith in technology to cure all ills, are we blind to the realisation that our society's progress, in important ways, is a shimmering mirage? Consumed by the vast time and energy simply required to survive the ever-increasing complexity of our systems of living, are we missing the slow extinction of our capacity to think and feel and bond deeply? We just might be too busy, wired, split-focused, and distracted to notice a return to an era of shadows and fear.

On the August day in 410 when the Goths brutally sacked Rome, the emperor was at his country house on the Adriatic, attending to his beloved flock of prize poultry. Informed by a servant that Rome had perished, the emperor, Honorius, was stunned. "Rome perished?" he said. "It is not an hour since she was feeding out of my hand." The chamberlain clarified himself. He'd been talking about the city, not the imperial bird of that name. Apocryphal as this story may be, the point is apt. For in the years leading into a dark age, societies often exhibit an inability to perceive or act upon a looming threat, such as a declining resource. Twilight cultures begin to show a preference for veneer and form, not depth and content; a stubborn blindness to the consequences of actions, from the leadership on down. In other words, an epidemic erosion of attention is a sure sign of an impending dark age.

Welcome to the land of distraction.

From Distracted, *by Maggie Jackson.*

This twittering world

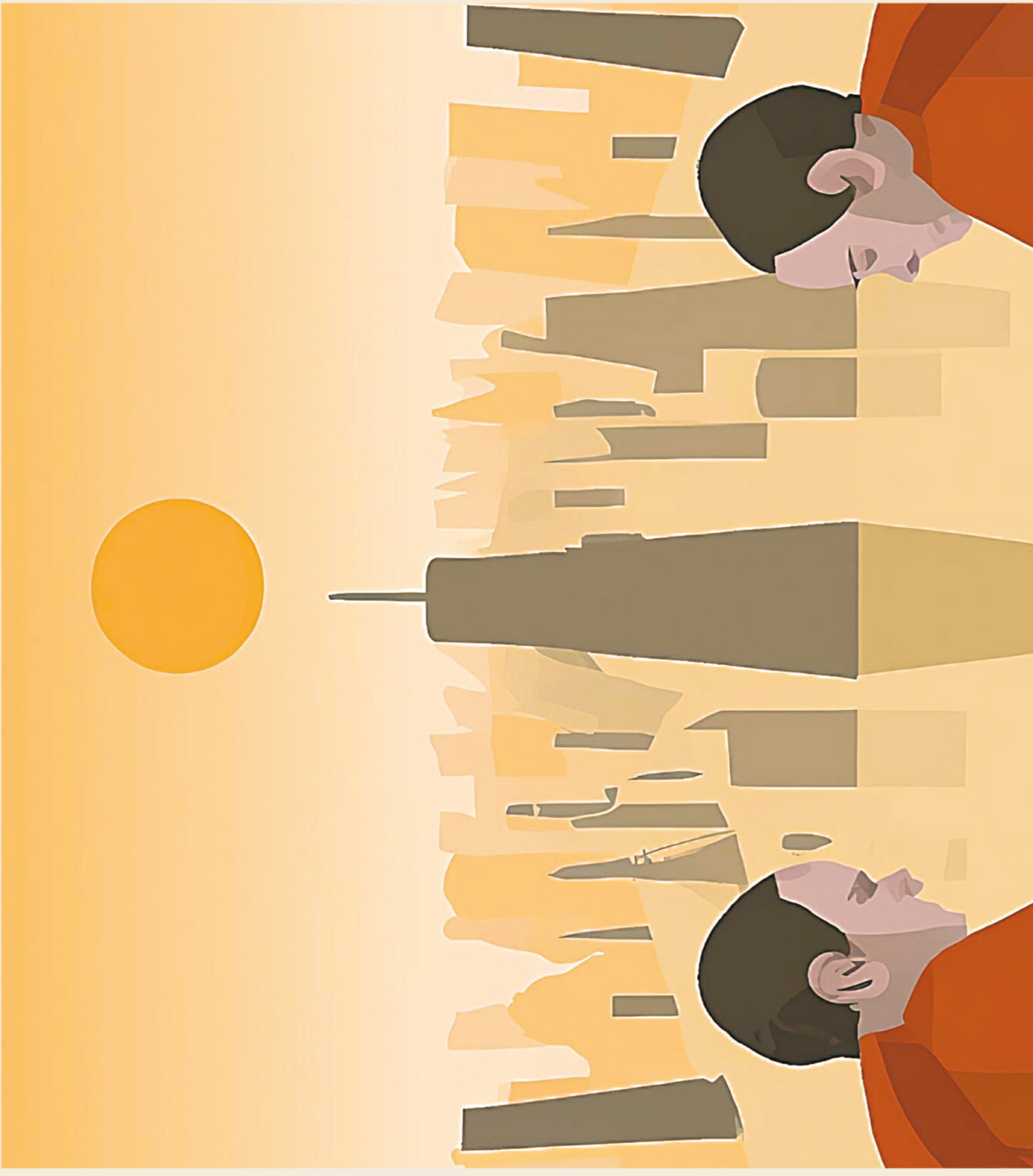
Here is a place of disaffection
Time before and time after
In a dim light: neither daylight
Investing form with lucid stillness
Turning shadow into transient beauty
With slow rotation suggesting permanence
Nor darkness to purify the soul
Emptying the sensual with deprivation
Cleansing affection from the temporal.

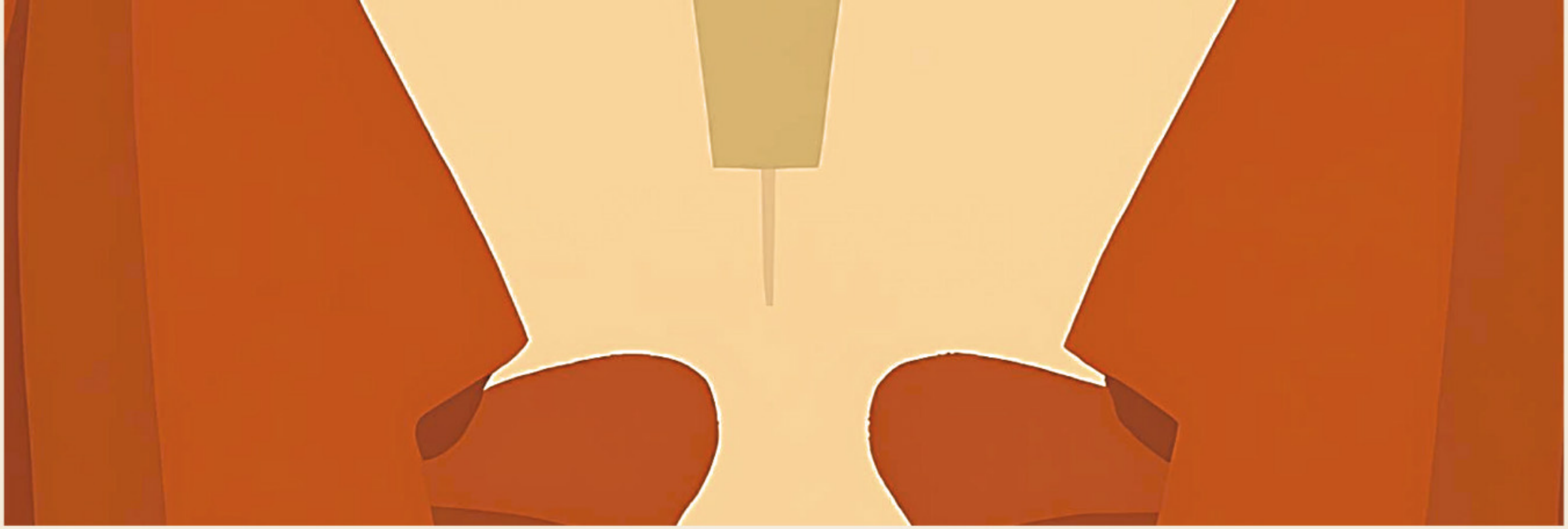
Neither plenitude nor vacancy.
Only a flicker
Over the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by distraction
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
Tumid apathy with no concentration
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
That blows before and after time,
Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
Time before and time after.

Eructation of unhealthy souls
Into the faded air, the torpid
Driven on the wind that sweeps the gloomy hills of London,
Hampstead and Clerkenwell, Campden and Putney,
Highgate, Primrose and Ludgate.
Not here
Not here the darkness, in this twittering world.

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
This is the one way, and the other
Is the same, not in movement
But abstention from movement; while the world moves
In appetency, on its metalled ways
Of time past and time future.

From *Burnt Norton,* by T.S. Eliot





Artwork: New Philosopher

Distraction rules

Interviewer: Zan Boag
Interviewee: Jamie Kreiner

Jamie Kreiner is Associate Dean, Franklin College of Arts and Sciences and Professor of History at the University of Georgia. Her research focuses on the mechanics of culture, especially in the quieter forces that shape ethical systems — forces that were not always purposeful, individual, or human. She is the author of *The Wandering Mind*, which tracks early Christian monks' frustrations with distraction, and *Legions of Pigs in the Early Medieval West*. Her work has been awarded prizes from the Medieval Academy of America, the American Society for Environmental History, the Society for French Historical Studies, the Agricultural History Society, the University of Georgia, and the Whiting Foundation.

Zan Boag: *It's easy to blame technology as the cause of our problems with distraction in the modern world, but your research shows that the problem of distraction is nothing new. While our propensity to be distracted may not by new, is the sheer volume of distraction the real problem?*

Jamie Kreiner: Usually a problem has multiple causes, and there are plenty of explanations for our current distractedness, such as the commodification of attention, global connectivity, the economic imperatives of productivity and growth, and a lag in our brains' evolutionary adaptation – to name just a few. But the feeling of information overload isn't new at all: people have been complaining about that for ages. From our perspective in the twenty-first century, it may seem like the quantity of information that humans have generated and accumulated is greater than it would have been, say, two thousand years ago. But there is also a lot of knowledge that we have lost or forgotten.

Although Ancient Greek and Roman intellectuals sometimes complained about distraction, it was early

The monks knew it was crucial to decide what we want to pay attention to. It's too easy to flit around from one thing to the next if we haven't decided what's worthy of our concentration.

Christian monks who waged an all-out war against it. What can we learn from their efforts to defeat distraction?

First, the monks knew it was crucial to decide what we want to pay attention to. It's too easy to flit around from one thing to the next if we haven't decided what's worthy of our concentration. Second, the monks appreciated that the mind was deeply intertwined with its environment. They carefully observed how their minds were affected by both internal and external forces, and they devised a range of different practices to combat the problem from different angles. There is no single solution. Third, the monks emphasised that these practices weren't quick fixes but long-term strategies – because distraction can't ever be defeated once and for all.

What sort of efforts did mediaeval monks undertake to defeat distraction? Which techniques did they devise in the quest to control their minds?

They tried to quit everything in their lives that didn't directly bear on their goal to concentrate on God. If they chose to live with other monks, they designed daily schedules to provide the ideal combination of variation and discipline, and they also set up systems of accountability so that their fellow monks could keep them in check. They trained their bodies through regimens of hygiene, sleep, celibacy, and diet to enhance the joint functioning of body and mind. They read and memorised books that they viewed as genuinely valuable, and they experimented with book technology to enhance their engagement with it. They adopted mnemonic and meditative practices that took advantage of the mind's natural mobility. They developed emotionally astute motivational prompts. They monitored how their thoughts came and went. They reflected on the cosmic connections between small earthly things and important celestial things in order to steer the mind toward views of the universe that were so encompassing that it no longer had to move back and forth to take it all in. And they consoled each other that failure was normal, and that attentiveness was worth fighting for anyway.

You refer to a "serious set of practices for cultivating awareness in a world in flux" in your book. What are these practices and how can we make use of them?

Most of us won't want to imitate the monks, exactly. Their work was designed for the world that they lived in, after all. But we could certainly take a panoramic view of our minds like they did, to appreciate why we need to do more than just turn our phones off sometimes. How are our minds affected by competing value systems, by the people around us, by our bodies, by the things we watch and read and listen to, by our relationship to our memories and habits of recollecting them, by our emotional states? Many early Christian monks were avid readers of scientific work, so I'll bet they would have appreciated the neuroscience and psychology lit that we can access today on the brain's executive functions. But the monks also closely observed themselves. We don't have to be neuroscientists to do that.

You note that monks tended to be aware that the fight against distraction was nearly impossible to win. Are we doomed to be distracted?

Probably! But we can definitely be less distracted.

Although we often think of distraction as coming from the outside, from objects or other people, did the monks see it mostly as an inner struggle?

Monks thought that anything had the potential to be distracting. As individual beings embedded in a complex and changing world, they were always going to be faced with opportunities to switch between focal points. But a potential distraction only became an actual distraction if a monk handled things badly. That's where all that training came in: monastic practice created the conditions in which a mind was likelier to resist distractions.

You write about how monks thought that books could be both distraction and clarification. Although we still have books, we also have many other distractions to contend with. Does this hold true for modern humans – that the various media we're exposed to can be both distraction and clarification?

It's probably true of anything. Video games and TV, for example, are often described as distractions, and yet there is research suggesting that they can actually be harnessed to benefit our powers of attention. We tend to think of books as 'better' for our attention than other media – but if that's true, it's mostly because both the technology, and our patterns of engaging with it, have been evolving since Late Antiquity. Historians like to say that nothing is inevitable. And when it comes to technology, our relationships to it matter as much as the formal properties of the tech itself.

In The Wandering Mind, *you refer to the efforts of monks as a "monastic laboratory" for experimentation on different solutions to distraction, both physical and psychological. Do you think in modern times this has been turned on its head and we have an "impious laboratory" for experimentation on ways to distract people as much as possible?*

When the historians Albrecht Diem and Claudio Rapp coined that phrase, they were highlighting the experimental, diverse, competitive, and genuinely optimistic nature of monasticism in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. It's hard to say whether today's tech and media landscape fits that description, exactly. Certainly industry has been highly inventive in finding different ways to compete for and increase user engagement – but the mood of social optimism seems somewhat deflated.

It's arrogant of us to think that we've progressed far beyond our predecessors, that we have more knowledge, more of an idea of how we work and the world around us. Have we made any progress when it comes to attention and distraction?

As much as we've learned about how the brain works, we're also in thrall to our email! Is that progress or decline? What I can say for sure is that we've lost many of the practical skills and strategies for concentrating that flourished in the premodern world – in part because we don't think of attention as holistically as our predecessors did.

In your book, you mention that when Stoic philosophers spoke of distraction, or perispasmos, *they were referring to the failure to prioritise properly, the demands of other people, and, importantly to them, the notion of 'appearances' – the things that were out of one's control. Of course, they advocated not judging such events, remaining indifferent to them, so as to not be distracted by these things. Could this idea of controlling one's reaction be of assistance when trying to remain focussed on what is important – a way of parrying the internal distractions that will inevitably arise throughout the day?*

I know how early Christian monks would have answered this question: yes, absolutely. They drew upon Stoic thinking to suggest that a distracting thought could be quickly neutralised if a monk chose not to engage with it. The difference between the monks and the Stoics was that monks thought it was necessary to conduct a preliminary appraisal – so if a monk identified an incoming thought as bad, she could determine that she didn't want to have anything to do with it, and the thought would disappear. Emotional or judgmental reactions weren't part of the Stoic repertory, but monks valued them tremendously. ◼

As much as we've learned about how the brain works, we're also in thrall to our email! Is that progress or decline?

by Jacqueline Winspear

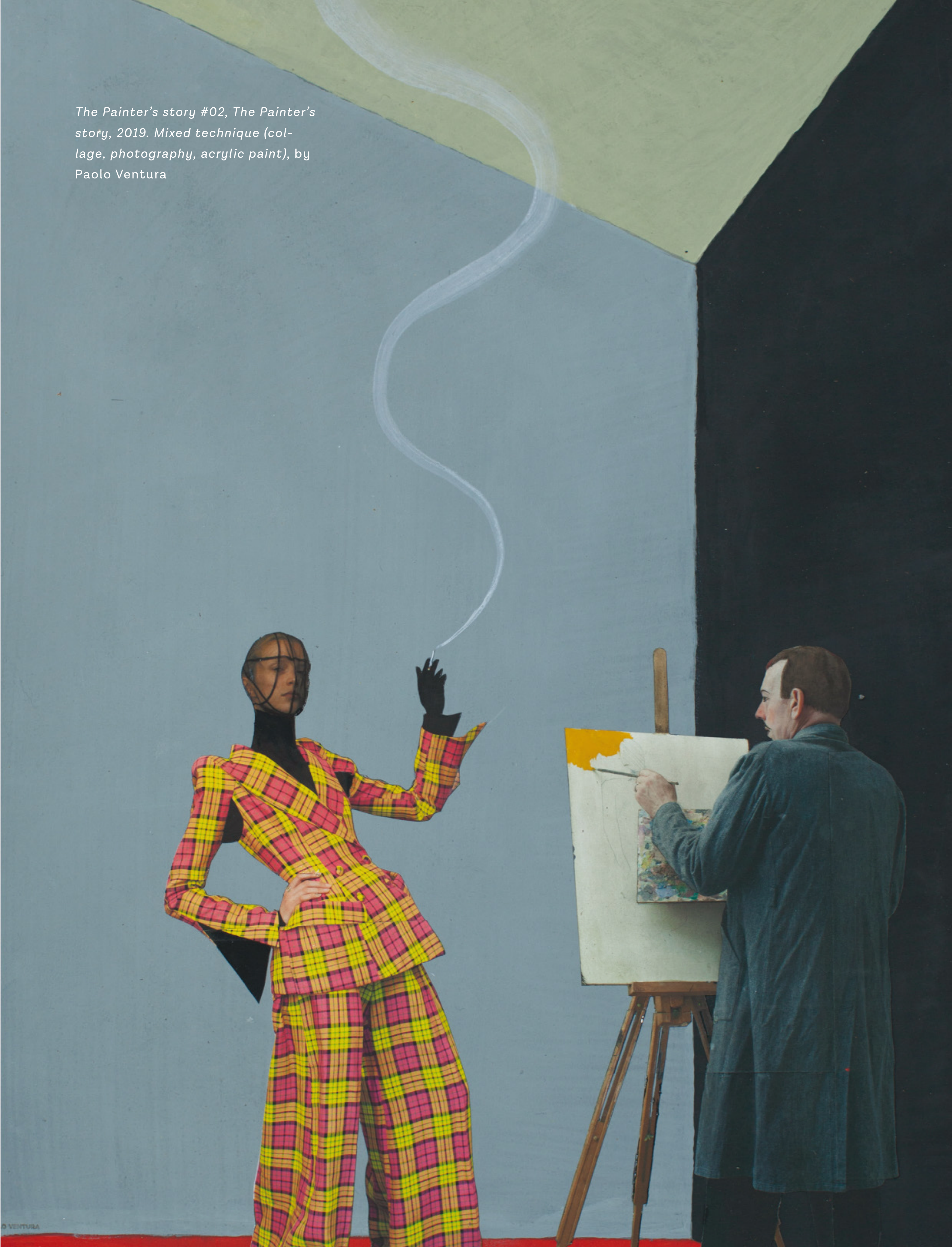
A mind full of distraction

In her new book, Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way To Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity, Dr Gloria Mark, Chancellor's Professor of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine, recounts a 2004 study in which she observed knowledge workers during a typical office day. She timed changes in tasks using a stopwatch and discovered that workers spent only two-and-a-half minutes on any given undertaking. Fast-forward to 2012 and another study utilising the same research protocols yielded a stunning result – the time spent on each task had halved to 75 seconds. Some ten years on, Mark wrote, "Our attention spans while on our computers and smartphones have become short – crazily short – as we now spend about 47 seconds on any screen."

Perhaps it's hardly surprising that along with increases in attention-draining tasks and obligations since 1990, the following decade heralded a burgeoning of contemporary interpretations of the Buddhist ideal of mindfulness. "Mindfulness has become something of a boom industry," according a 2018 paper by philosopher Terry Hyland, who cites Emeritus Professor of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Jon Kabat-Zinn and renowned Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh as groundbreakers of the trend. It seems that as distractions mounted, so did our craving for a solution. Yet how do we go about the practicality of assimilating increasing demands to multi-task our way through the day, when our mammalian brain is hard-wired to react to every notification from the many devices available for both work and recreation? After all, that ping is akin to a rustle in the bushes that heralded danger or a meal for our long-ago ancestors.

Renee Klein, a yoga therapist and co-owner of Madrona MindBody Institute in Port Townsend in the US, indicated the way ahead. "To me, mindfulness is doing one thing at a time. As the Buddhist teaching tells us, 'When I eat, I eat. When I walk, I walk, and when I sit, I sit.'" Klein adds, "Most western cultures are not very good at doing just one thing. There is praise for the super-busy person – yet when you're not paying attention to just one thing, you're paying attention to nothing."

Klein's words reflect Mark's findings, with recent research revealing the vulnerability of schoolchildren and students in particular, and the impact of constant distraction on behaviour. Scientists have written about the "dopamine hit" that comes with every text message, a little thrill in the brain that draws attention away from learning. A school psychologist recounted the story of a child diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, who during one session had told her, "Sometimes I just lose a caboose on my train of thought." Losing that caboose can have dire consequences. According



The Painter's story #02, The Painter's story, 2019. Mixed technique (collage, photography, acrylic paint), by Paolo Ventura to Klein, "The scariest outcome of distraction is accidents. If people are texting while walking, they're more likely to fall, and if they're driving while using a cellphone, they aren't paying attention to the road."

At a time when smartphones in particular are associated with increases in depression, anxiety, insomnia, loneliness – and according to a recent study, even gut health – it would seem crucial that being 'mindful' must be taken seriously for all aspects of the human experience. But is the adoption of mindfulness practice the answer for everyone? Without doubt, those who were children before the age of video games and cellphones, an era when many parents would limit exposure to radio and television, have observed that instead of being in thrall to a text message or the next shared video, they were able to daydream, play outside with friends, finish homework uninterrupted, or read books.

Middle and high school English teacher Cindy Israel, who is based in Ojai, California, says that distraction in the classroom is nothing new. "When I first started teaching some thirty years ago, it was notes passed back and forth, but now I have to be strict about cellphones – they must be turned off as soon as the students enter my classroom, though they are allowed to keep the phone with them in the case of an emergency." In addition to traditional teaching methods – including periods of 'silent reading' – Israel incorporates a range of media in her classes to reflect changing student concentration habits.

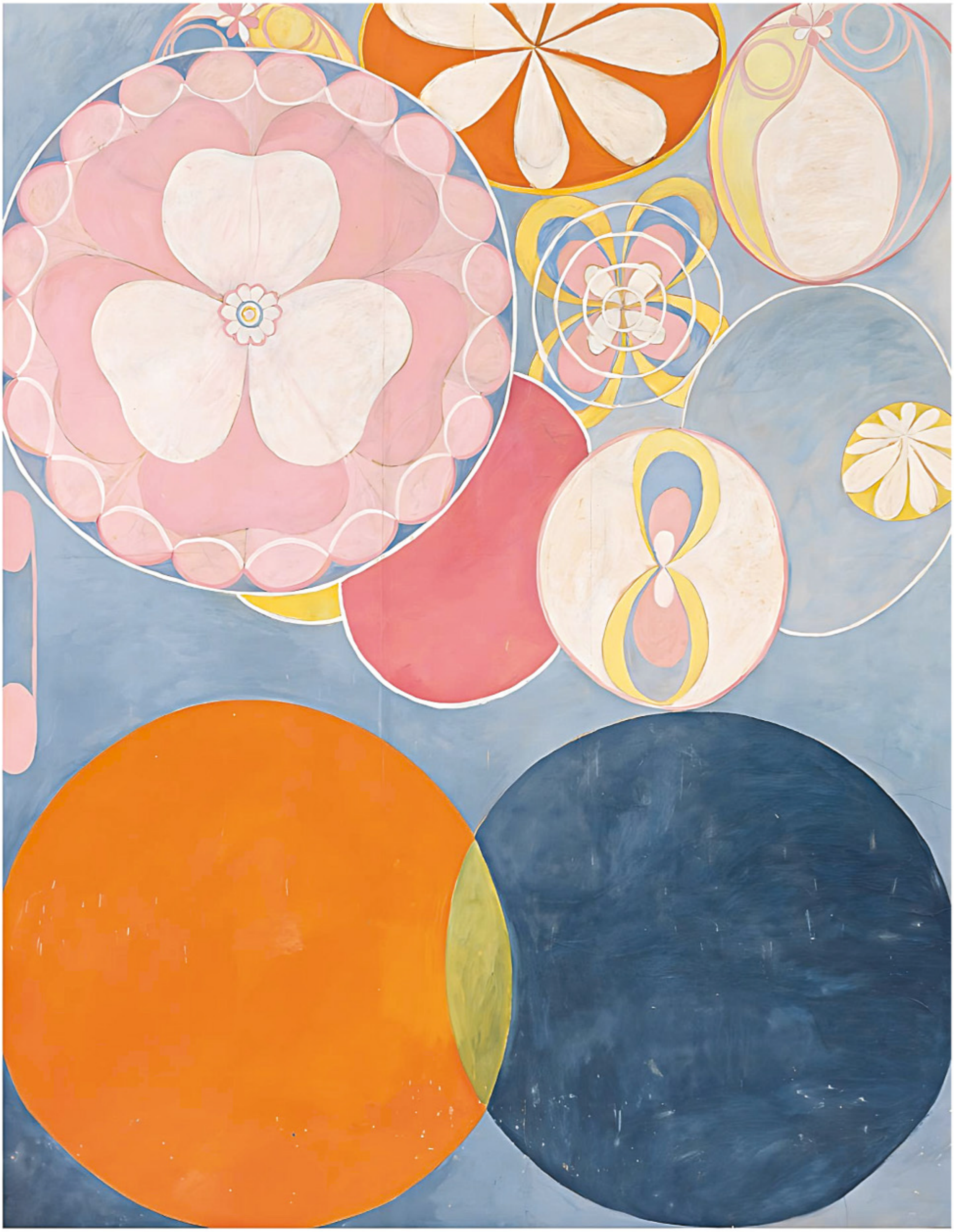
Jon Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as, "Paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally," with the result that it "nurtures greater awareness, clarity and acceptance of present-moment reality". With mindfulness as an antidote to distraction and associated with improved attention spans, an increasing number of schools are instituting a 'quiet time' at some point during the day. Hyland quotes a 2009 study by Schoeberlein and Sheth, 'Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness', during which mindfulness techniques were adopted in US schools and colleges, concluding that "mindfulness promotes resilience and enhances social and emotional competence".

Given our extensive access to communications technology and social expectations of an immediate response to messages, how might we harness a meaningful focus on the present moment? "You don't have to become a monk," says Renee Klein. "We can all take a few minutes each day to just stop and breathe. You can sit, lay down, walk – but be mindful and notice the breath once a day for five minutes, lengthening the exhaling breath to lower stress."

Klein also advises associating a favourite colour with mindfulness, so for example, every time you see the colour red, you breathe in then take a long exhale. "The colour becomes a signal for our brain to slow down. And good posture helps you to breathe properly."

If we wish to be dominant in the face of distraction, then we must be mindful of its power. Technology should be our servant, not our master, though to be fair, not all distractions have notifications, wires, chips, and screens. Dr Gloria Mark is optimistic. "We can learn to adapt to our own rhythms of attention – finding focus, fighting distraction, and ultimately feeling more balanced and less stressed in our daily lives. The ship has sailed: we live in an interconnected world and need to use our devices – but we can also achieve well-being while doing so."

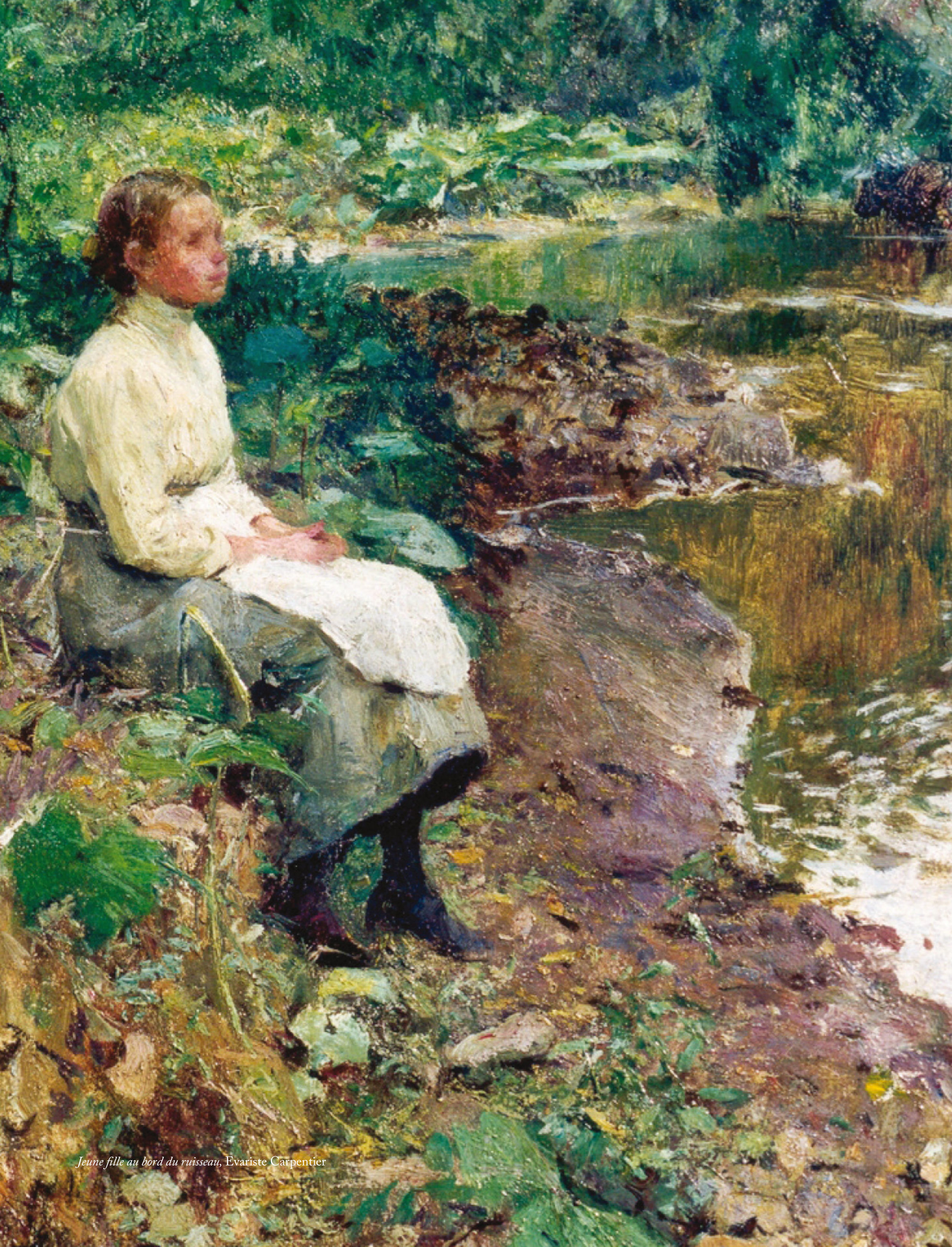
If we wish to be dominant in the face of distraction, then we must be mindful of its power.



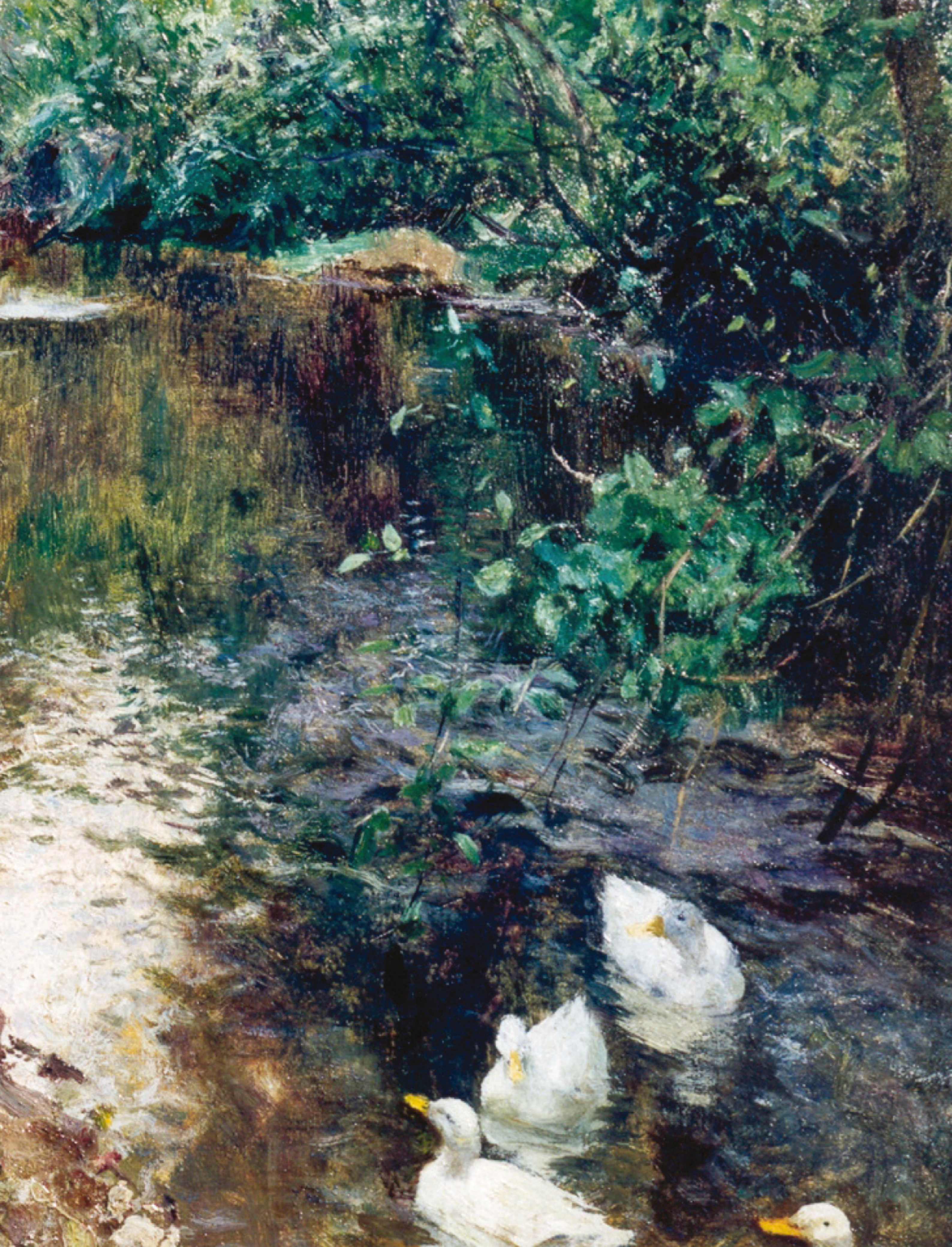
> “The multitude is a distraction and scare
> to the artist.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The Ten Biggest No 2, Hilma af Klint 1907



Jeune fille au bord du ruisseau, Evariste Carpentier



Interviewee: James M. Lang
Interviewer: Zan Boag

The power of flow

James M. Lang is the author of six books, including *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It* and *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. Jim writes a monthly column on teaching and learning for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; his work has been appearing in the *Chronicle* since 1999. His book reviews and public scholarship on higher education have appeared in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines, including the *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Time*. A former Professor of English and Director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption University, Lang has delivered conference keynotes and workshops on teaching for faculty at more than two hundred colleges, universities, and high schools in the United States and abroad. He has consulted with the United Nations on a multi-year project to develop teaching materials in ethics and integrity for high school and college faculty, and is the recipient of a 2016 Fulbright Specialist Grant.

Zan Boag: *Your book,* Distracted, *came out at a strange time, just before the pandemic hit. And, as you well know, the pandemic meant that educators right around the world had to make the transition from teaching face-to-face to teaching online. Now, when it comes to retaining the attention of students, are there aspects of online teaching that you think are beneficial? Are there others that are problematic?*

James Lang: My real goal is to think about the role that attention plays in supporting learning. We tend to focus our thinking, our problem-solving, on how we get rid of distractions. So my goal has really been to think about, "OK, distractions are everywhere. That's been the case for a long time." The question is: how do we cultivate attention?" And I think that it is definitely context-specific. In a face-to-face classroom, certain kinds of things are going to work well that are not going to work so well in an online environment. With the online environment, there has been some research which shows that it's more difficult for us to stay focused on a cognitively challenging task, like trying to listen to a lecture, because there's so much stuff that's available to us right on the thing that we're using to get the ideas and the words of the speaker. And there are other distractions: I might have my phone out, I'm sitting in my house and I'm hungry, I've got a puppy that wants to be taken out. So all these things are going to be interfering with my ability to pay attention when I'm doing something online. As a teacher in a physical classroom, I can try to control some of those things. Not controlling in a menacing way, but just in a supportive way. In a physical classroom I can respond when I see attention drifting away. But I don't see that so much when I'm the speaker in a virtual environment. Paying attention online, especially when it's something that challenges us cognitively, is more difficult because of the presence of these things that are easy for us to turn to when we're bored or when we're feeling especially challenged. The one thing that I would say maybe, as one positive thing, is that the brain loves novelty, so we like to move

from thing to thing with our attention. And we know this from evolutionary history and biology. This was a helpful adaptation for us to be aware of novelty in our environment – which is why we love our phones, because they're giving us endless novelty. And so if a person who's aware of that and has the tech savvy to create an online learning experience which moves us through things and introduces variety and change, that might be a positive thing you could use in an online environment.

You write in your book that attention contributes to learning in the classroom environments and distraction gets in the way – so really you're looking to enhance attention and reduce distractions. Is this something that holds true outside the classroom as well? Do distractions inhibit learning and development in our lives, outside of the classroom environment?

The general principle is that we want to try to look for places that are going to support our attention both for learning and also for our thriving as humans. I think that's true both in the classroom and outside of the classroom. The research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on the power of flow experiences in our lives shows that the more time we spend in flow activities, the higher our overall sense of wellbeing will be. And flow activities are ones that really hold our attention. That's one of the things that's characteristic of flow; when I'm engaged in an activity and it's pushing me just beyond my limits, it's challenging me a little bit further than what I'm comfortable with, and that it holds my attention. As a result of that, a flow activity pushes other things out of my mind – all of the normal anxieties and worries of my day, the big things that are hanging over my head – and that's a positive thing for our emotional state, our happiness, our overall flourishing.

So sometimes people who are not teachers will ask me, "What can I do in my life that would create better attention for me or reduce distractions?" And my answer to them is the same one I give to teachers, which is to maximise these flow opportunities, to have as many of these attention supporting moments in your life. So don't worry so much that sometimes you're on your phone, you're standing in a line or you're just sitting on your couch and it's the end of the day, that's fine, but make sure you're doing these other things over the course of your day which are really absorbing your attention.

So in a way, distraction is the enemy of flow, of flow states. And so it can be, in a way, an impediment to whether we flourish in our lives.

I do think distraction can be an impediment to flourishing, absolutely. First of all, it gets in the way of some of our goals. So we have goals, long-term goals, and that's something that humans are really good at: setting long-term goals and then working slowly over long periods of time to achieve them. And distractions get in the way of that, they can be something that not only affect us emotionally but also professionally.

But I think it's also the case that it drains us emotionally. If I sit in my chair and spend two hours just scrolling through social media feeds, that can actually amp up my feelings of anxiety and unproductivity, things that are going to make me feel worse about myself and my life from just spending all that time in the company of these distractions.

It's interesting, the point you make that external distractions could actually increase the level of internal distractions that we

If I sit in my chair and spend two hours just scrolling through social media feeds, that can actually amp up my feelings of anxiety and unproductivity.

experience, so that we start having these negative thoughts and so on from having been on social media. How do internal and external distractions differ? Is one more of a hindrance than the other? Of course, recognising that there's a large degree of neurodiversity in the world.

I would go back to Aristotle here. Aristotle argues that if you want to be a just person, you engage in just acts and you mould yourself into being a just person by doing just things. And I think that's true for distractions as well. The more time I spend in the company of my distractions, the more I become a distractable person. And the same is true in the other direction. The more time I spend in activities that are going to absorb my attention, my capacity to pay attention in other contexts will start to grow and I will be aware of the positive things that are going to come out of those attentional states and I'll be more committed to them. I do think it is very similar to virtue ethics here, when it comes to distraction and attention.

Right. So you're saying that concentration or focus is almost a virtue?

It is, and it's also something that is a skill that we can develop.

In your book you refer to developing this skill as 'cultivating attention'. In what ways can we cultivate attention? Is it a matter of actively trying to focus or do we also have to develop ways of combating these distractions?

So there's two things. The first, which we've just been talking about, relates to how you want to try to approach any challenge in your life, any skill you're trying to cultivate. You want to use your willpower, in the same way you would try to develop another habit or a skill or a virtue. Part of that is just our commitment to it and our ability to see the reasons for doing it, and then pursue it. The other important thing though is that you have to be willing to make changes to your environment. So the example that I always give to people is, let's say your doctor told you to give up chocolate. And so you say, "OK, I'm going to use my willpower. I see the reason for doing it – it's going to make me more healthy – so I'm going to give up chocolate." But the first thing I'm going to do is to take all the chocolate out of my house. I'm going to shape my environment and that's going to support me. It's the same when it comes to distraction or attention. A strategy I take when I want to sit down and do some productive writing is that I will close all the tabs on my browser, put my phone away, and sit at my desk for 45 minutes. For those 45 minutes I am just going to write. After that, I can spend 15 minutes on Instagram or whatever. And then I get back into it. But if I try to write and I have my email open, and my phone is sitting right there – that's an environment that's going to erode my attention. So I'm trying to create the environment that supports my goal. I think you really have to have both: willpower or commitment, or whatever we might call it, and then also the awareness of how to shape the environment that's going to support you.

It reminds me of Lewin's Equation that behaviour is a function of personality and environment. I do agree that you need to actively shape your environment if you want your behaviour to shift in some way. And because we have so many distractions, I suppose this is something that we have to be terribly conscious of if we want to get anything at all done these days.

It's interesting that a lot of the tech people who have created some of this stuff, they are very aware of the challenges that they pose. You'll see people who have founded these tech

James Lang

The more time I spend in the company of my distractions, the more I become a distractable person.

companies or developed these apps and they keep them out of their house, away from their children. They recognise that their ability to get these things done and make these billion-dollar apps has been predicated on the fact that they're not going to let them interfere with their work habits.

I think we're all struggling with this because everything is so new in human history, and we're all trying to figure out the changes that we need to make. That was one of the goals for me in the book – to say, "Let's be deliberate about this in terms of what we can do as teachers for the students who are in our classrooms." And one of my goals as a teacher would be for students to see what it's like to be in a classroom that supports attention, and this might model for them some of the ways that they may be able to use their attention outside of the classroom as well.

I know some teachers have gone a few steps further – in your book you mention one who banned laptops. Some schools have banned smartphones. Teachers must feel like distraction is getting out of hand, that they're not getting anything done in class. Do you think that a lot of teachers, if they could wave a magic wand, would remove smartphones altogether so students could no longer be distracted by them?

I suspect a lot of us would like to do that. But there are productive uses of smartphones in the classroom. For example, a lot of teachers use polling now, they'll throw a question out and students can respond to a poll on their phone. And I think that's a good teaching technique. You can certainly do it in non-digital ways as well, but it can be interesting for students to see, for example, what other students are thinking about this issue.

I suppose students have always been distracted, it's just that this is yet another thing for them to be distracted by. You write in your book that we've had concerns about distraction for millennia, that "a wandering mind represented a threat to the ideals of Greek philosophers who viewed ordered rational thought as the ultimate achievement of the human species". Now, is this 'ultimate achievement' simply unattainable? Are we genetically predisposed to be distracted? I can't help but think of the part in your book when you refer to the findings of a neuroscientist, Adam Gazzaley, and a psychologist, Larry Rosen. They describe humans as having "ancient brains in a high-tech world".

Yes. I think that the fully attentive person isn't an ideal that most of us will ever achieve. Obviously, we see people who have been able to do it. For example, you might think about monks and people who have really been able to keep all the current technologies at bay. We probably all know one or two of those people who are just really good at maintaining their productivity throughout all these changes that we've been experiencing. But I do think we are predisposed to distraction – this is the way our brains work. In their book *Distracted Mind*, Adam Gazzaley and Larry Rosen point out the fact that an early human needed two kinds of attention, and one of those kinds of attention was, for example, to really focus and track prey, for example, to build a shelter. That took focus and attention. It's an hour until darkness falls, there are predators around, and you have to get a shelter up. Accomplishing that survival goal requires serious focus. That's the kind of attention we tend to think about when we talk about attention.

But while you were doing that, you had to be aware of the fact there might be predators around you. So if you were completely focused, you would get eaten eventually. Some part of the brain had to be scanning the environment and looking for novelty: movement, sounds, lights, changes of any kind. So you had to have both of these kinds of attention. Today these

I think all we're struggling with this because everything is so new in human history, and we're all trying to figure out the changes that we need to make.

How do you hold a novelty-loving brain? You have to show it a continuous circuit of text, images, games, and more.

two forms of attention manifest in a very different environment: I'm trying to read and yet my phone is pinging me. It's the same brain, it's dealing with the same two problems, but they take different forms.

I don't want to say that nothing has changed because it has. St. Augustine talks about walking to the Colosseum and he's praying or thinking, and then a rabbit runs by and distracts him. The fact that Augustine mentions this scenario means that he's reflecting upon the distractibility of the human mind two millennia ago. But a rabbit is a very quick and simple distraction. A running rabbit catches your attention for a moment, but then it's gone and you keep walking and go back to your praying or thinking. But now, the rabbits of the 21st century are so much more powerful at distracting us. They are at our fingertips all the time and they give us nonstop access to novelty and stimulation.

Well, the difference is that the rabbit is intentionally distracting us now.

Exactly. Our device and apps have been created by people who have this goal in mind: to keep my attention on that device for as long as possible and to make money from it. So they're not just giving us entertainment, they're a multi-billion dollar industry predicated on the fact that they have to hold our attention. How do you hold a novelty-loving brain? You have to show it a continuous circuit of text, images, games, and more. The folks who create these apps and consult with these companies, they know their stuff – they've researched the neuroscience, the cognitive psychology. They know how the brain works and they are using it to help develop these apps. In one of the new books that just came out, *Stolen Focus*, Johann Hari points out one of the things that changed was the use of the infinite scroll.

Yes, it used to end and then you'd have to click to go to another page.

Exactly, it changed to the scroll, which tends to be used on our phones. You never have to make an active decision to keep going because it just keeps going for you.

We've spoken a lot about digital distraction, but I just wonder if internal distractions are a bigger issue given the amount of information that we're exposed to in any given week. And also the fact that we can't turn off our minds. We can turn off a device, we can set it aside, we can walk away, but we're stuck with ourselves. With all of the information that's going in, the distractions, I wonder if that is a more serious problem than it has been in the past.

Well, I think that we've definitely seen an uptick in mental health concerns, especially in teens and college students. There's no question that if you're experiencing acute anxiety it gets in the way of studying and learning and doing the things that are going to help you achieve your goals, whatever those might be. We all experience everyday anxiety, so we know that, for example, if I have a test coming up and yet I know that I can't afford the heat in my apartment or something like that, then that's going to interfere with my ability to do well on that test. We know that. But if you have this kind of more clinical anxiety where it's always present in your brain, your cognitive resources will aways be more limited. Your anxieties are going to eat away at your attentional resources.

For these kinds of internal distractions, we need another level of solutions. For people who are struggling with anxiety in that more long-term way, medication can help, of course. There are also other kinds of therapies that help – mindfulness, for example. There has been a huge upswing of interest in mindfulness. Regular mindfulness exercises give you practice in focusing and that can be another strategy to use both for acute and more long-term anxiety.

With these internal distractions that people have, well, an external distraction is something that could shift them away from that internal distraction, and some people will therefore see that as a 'welcome' distraction. They're pleased to be distracted from whatever it is that they might be thinking about or doing. These welcome distractions also apply when doing a task that's boring – it could be cleaning the kitchen, listening to a lecture at university, whatever it may be. How does this 'welcome' distraction differ from the 'unwanted' distraction, such as too much noise when you're trying to work or endless interruptions from your smartphone while you're having dinner with friends?

I guess it's the context and the reasons why you're going to that distraction. So I might go to my distractions when I'm feeling anxious or afraid or depressed. Going to my distractions can help me turn away some of those feelings and help me keep them at bay on a temporary basis. And at times we want to be able to do that, no question about it. But if I'm trying to do something that requires focus, like write a book chapter, going to my distraction in those moments will get in the way of what I'm trying to do. And that's probably going to have a negative impact on me emotionally or mentally. So again, it's completely context specific. Right now, after we finish this interview, I'm going to try to start writing, but at that point, I'm going to try to shape my environment in the ways I mentioned before: putting my phone in the other room, closing out my email, etc. But if later today I'm going to exercise, after which I will come home and sit in my chair for a while and look at my phone, that's fine. I don't really have anything else to do in those moments. My distractions are not getting in the way of anything that I care about.

A lot of it is just really awareness. It's so easy to get lost in the phone and not even realise that it's happening. So both as teachers and as humans, the main thing is to just understand what's happening and be deliberate about the choices that you're making. And that's, I think, the best thing that we can do, and even the best thing we can hope for, because the technology will continue to get more and more intense. The best thing we can do is be aware of the things that distract us, keep an eye on what's happening, and make good decisions about what will be best for each of us individually.

I like that idea of awareness. And I think that this is the case with any developments that humans have had to deal with over the years – we do find a way to adapt to the new set of circumstances. But in this instance, it's going to require a bit of education for people so they don't just sit there and have these distractions wash over them, and before they know it they're not getting anything done in their lives that they want to get done. And this ties back into what you were saying earlier about the concept of flourishing, that distraction can get in the way of flourishing. If you don't get a handle on distractions and you don't have some control over them, then they can get in the way of you flourishing in your life.

Yes, one last thing on that too. One of the things that we know is good for a thriving human is sleep. A lot of research shows that if you're on your phone and have a screen in front of you in the minutes or hours before you go to bed, that gets in the way of your sleep. Again, being on your phone is not a bad thing necessarily, but doing it in the wrong place and being completely distracted on your phone and stimulating your

The best thing we can do is be aware of the things that distract them, keep an eye on what's happening, and make good decisions about what will be best for each of us individually.

brain with all these kinds of novelties on your phone right before going to sleep – that's getting in the way of something important.

You previously touched on the mental health concerns that stem from this. Is there any research that links distraction and the inability to concentrate on increased stress, anxiety, and other mental health concerns?

This is really a minefield research area. So the research has been largely correlation on a big scale. People can look at the rise of mental health concerns amongst young people over the last two decades and then can look at when the smartphone was invented and its gradual adaptation. And there's no question you see correlation there.

But the causal relationship is difficult to tease out: are smartphones driving the mental health issues, or is it the other way around? My gut instinct tells me that the technology might be intensifying anxiety in young people. But there are people on both sides of this question. Some people suggest the causality goes in the other direction. And that's plausible to me. If you're anxious, one thing that you can do is to look at your phone. And as you scroll through your social media accounts, as we said earlier, that might keep you from thinking about your anxiety. So if there are a lot more anxious people around than there used to be, then we would see increased smartphone use.

Teachers have always had to work hard to gain and retain the attention of students. It has always been a problem, but now they're competing not just with daydreaming and a distracted mind, but streaming world news, celebrity gossip, sports scores, social media, texting, and they're all within the reach of the students while they're sitting in the classroom. Of course, this applies at work and in our personal lives: it could be at dinner with friends. These digital distractions are very difficult for us to resist and there are so many ways we can be distracted from what's important to us. Is there some sort of strategy that people can adopt to combat the temptation to be distracted?

I'm not sure there's an easy way for us to combat the temptation, I have to be a realist about this: these new technologies will continue to challenge us until our brains evolve. It might take hundreds of years, many generations, for our brains to change and work at top efficiency in a very distracting environment. Until then, we are challenged by this, there's no question about it. Until then, I would point to the three things we have to work at as humans, teachers, and students.

First, we have to educate ourselves about what's going on. Why do we feel distracted at certain times? What does the research tell us about the ways that all our technologies are designed to intensify the problem for us? Be aware.

Second, shape our environments in ways that are going to be supportive for us – not for other companies or other people. What are the things that are going to be best for me, which might be different for the ones that are best for you. We need to shape our environments consciously and with awareness.

Finally, maximise the times in our lives when we are paying attention. What are these times in my day when I'm really focused – and then remember how I felt at the end of the day having had these attention-cultivating experiences and knowing, "Wow, I really got a lot done today, I feel great today."

So, think about those moments of your day, try to maximise them, and be deliberate about creating them. The more you do that, the more the distractions are going to recede into the background. ◼

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Rare and wonderful

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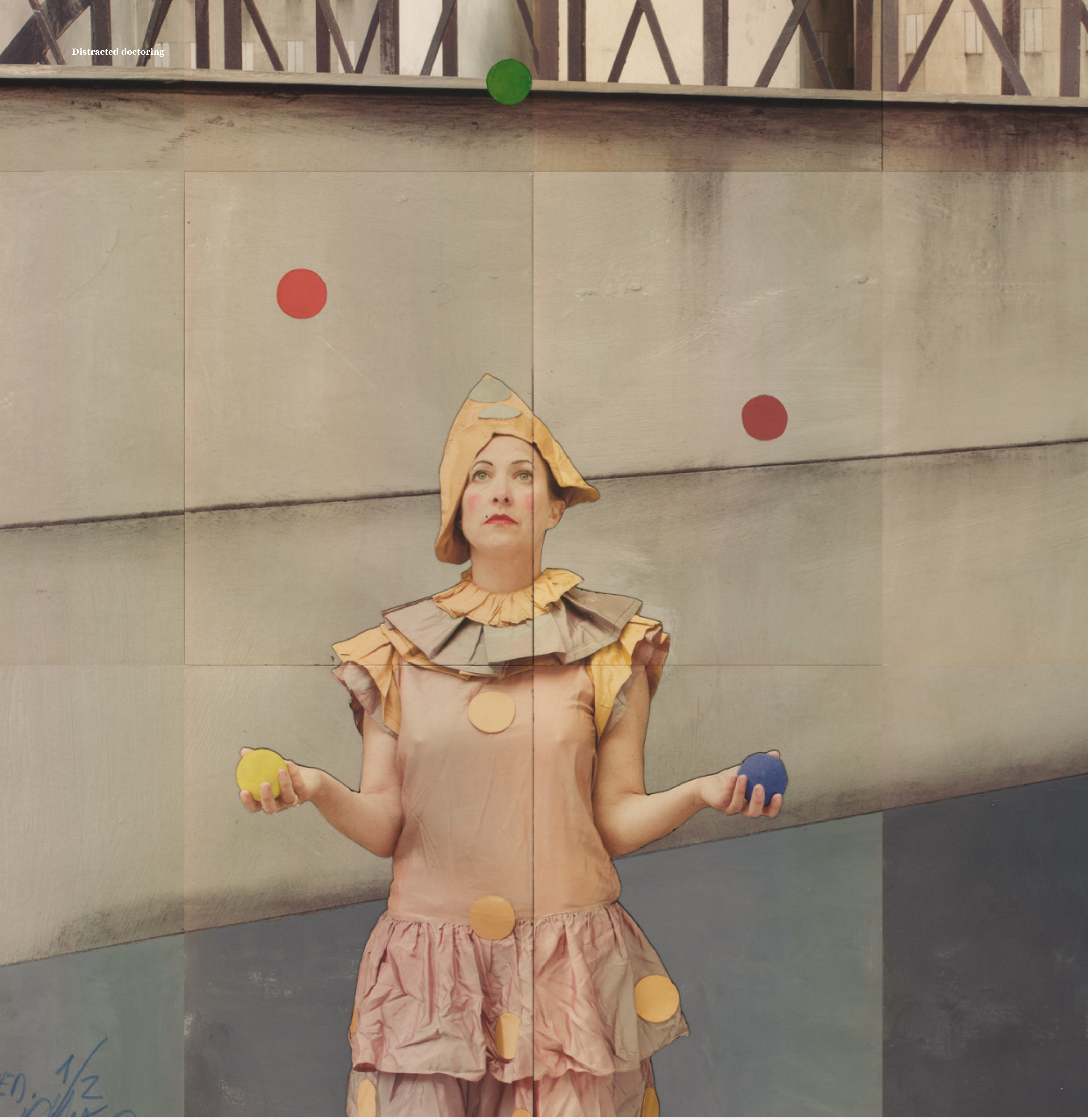


21 Marzo, La città Infinita, 2015, Mixed technique (collage, photography, acrylic paint), by Paolo Ventura

DISTRACTED

DOCTORING

By Tiger Roholt

A 56-year-old man was admitted to a teaching hospital for a routine medical procedure. Following the procedure, the doctors decided to put him on the blood-thinning medication, Warfarin. The next day, after a further assessment of the man's condition, the attending physician determined that the patient should be taken off Warfarin. The case I am describing was reported by John Halamka in his article, 'Order Interrupted by Text: Multitasking Mishap'.

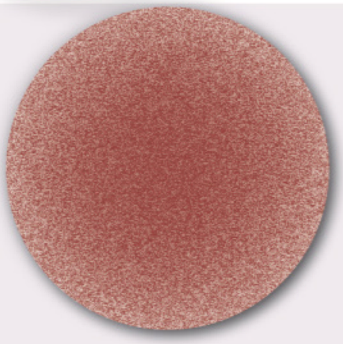
When the article was written, Halamka was Chair of the US Healthcare Information Technology Standards Panel. Before rejoining the story, we need a piece of context that Halamka provides: "This academic medical centre had a robust computerised physician order entry (CPOE) system that allowed providers to enter orders using handheld devices and smartphones."

Returning to the case now: The attending physician tells a resident (a junior doctor) to submit the order to stop the patient's blood-thinning medication. The resident picks up their smartphone, and begins entering the order to stop the Warfarin.

While entering the order, a text message arrives from a friend with an invitation to a party. (Yes, a party.) The resident reads the text, and then writes a text message, in reply, for the purpose of RSVP-ing. Distracted by the text and reply, the resident fails to complete the order to stop the blood-thinner. Halamka explains what happened next:

Because everyone on the team thought the medication had been stopped, no one checked the patient's INR [a measure of anticoagulation intensity]. In addition, because of the robust CPOE system, neither the intern nor resident reviewed the medication list for the next few days so no one recognised that the patient was still receiving the Warfarin.

Suspense is not one of my go-to writing tactics, so I will tell you that the patient survived – but only after



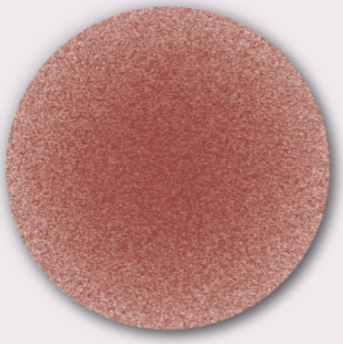
Healthcare professionals also use their smartphones for personal purposes while on duty; this is referred to in the literature as off-task use.

emergency open-heart surgery, which was required to deal with the excess blood around his heart.

The journalist who coined the term, “Distracted Doctoring”, Matt Richtel, tells of a less-lucky patient, in his article, ‘As Doctors Use More Devices, Potential for Distraction Grows’. Scott J. Eldredge, a medical malpractice lawyer in Denver, recently represented a patient who was left partly paralysed after surgery. The neurosurgeon was distracted during the operation, using a wireless headset to talk on his cellphone. “He was making personal calls,” Mr Eldredge said, at least 10 of them to family and business associates, according to phone records. His client’s case was settled before a lawsuit was filed so there are no court records, like the name of the patient, doctor or hospital involved. Mr Eldredge, citing the agreement, declined to provide further details. Richtel also relates the Warfarin story in another article, ‘Multitasking Doctor Imperils Patient, Case Study Says’.

Now, there is no doubt that healthcare professionals have benefitted from the easy access that smartphones have provided to medical records, reference sources, and clinical systems, as well as the increased efficiency of communicating with colleagues and patients. Using smartphones for such purposes during working hours is referred to in the social-science literature as on-task smartphone-use. But, as we have just seen, healthcare professionals also use their smartphones for personal purposes while on duty; this is referred to in the literature as off-task use. As has just been brought home, off-task smartphone-use can distract healthcare professionals from their work. In addition to individual case reports such as those above, many studies have been conducted in recent years that bear this out. The lion’s share of the social-science research focuses not on doctors but on nurses and medical technicians. (Why? I will keep my guesses to myself.) As we move through… we will see that the distinction between on-task and off-task smartphone-use, while simple, is extremely useful.

Consider two studies, one of nurses, the other of nursing students. In a 2019 study based on the self-reporting of 256 nurses in Italy, “42% of nurses report that they were distracted by their use of smartphones”. In 2016, Sumi Cho and Eunjoo Lee conducted a survey-based study of 312 nursing students in two nursing schools in the Republic of Korea; they found that 27.9% “of the nursing students reported that they had been distracted” by smartphone-use. While most of the relevant studies focus on nurses, medical technicians are also under



scrutiny. One alarming result from a 2010 study of perfusionists [a member of the cardiovascular surgical team] in the United States found that 49.2% of 439 respondents reported sending text messages during cardiopulmonary bypass procedures.

A concerning phenomenon that emerges in a number of these studies is that there are more incidents of distraction reported when respondents flag the distraction of their colleagues rather than their own. In Cho and Lee's study, while 27.9% of respondents reported being distracted by smartphone-use themselves, "42.9% of the respondents reported that they had witnessed other students' distraction by smartphone use".

An important social aspect of smartphone-distraction that emerges from some of these studies is that respondents report being distracted by the smartphone-use of nearby others. In Cho and Lee's study, for instance, "27.9% . . . of the nursing students reported that they had been distracted by externally . . . initiated smartphone use".

There are so many studies about smartphone-distraction in healthcare that one can find articles such as a 2021 article with this title: 'Smartphone distraction during nursing care: Systematic literature review'. The obvious is made clear in this study: a principal concern that motivates the research on smartphone-distraction in healthcare is the prospect that it can negatively affect the care of patients. In selecting studies for their review, the authors excluded "studies that deal with the use of mobile devices but not with the risk associated with their use".

Sojourner Truth

So, what about errors made due to smartphone-distraction? In a 2019 survey-based study of healthcare providers in emergency departments in Lebanon, Mohamad Alameddine and his colleagues found that 55% of survey respondents "reported observing their colleagues having made an error or a near miss as a result of being distracted by their SDs [smart devices]".

And as with the reporting of distraction generally, the negative effects of smartphone-distraction are also reported at a much higher rate by others. In a 2015 study yielding 950 respondents (members of the Academy of Medical Surgical Nurses), Deborah McBride and her colleagues considered three categories of negative effects of smartphone-use: "(1) negative performance, (2) medical errors, and (3) missed clinical information." Consider the results in the following quotations from the study.

[1] A significantly lower percentage of respondents self-reported mobile phone-related performance decrements (7.4%, 61/825) than reported witnessing mobile phone-related performance decrements in other nurses (70.9%, 584/825).

[2] Significantly fewer respondents self-reported making medical errors (adverse effect of care, including a near-miss or a sentinel event) because of a mobile phone-related distraction (0.8%, 7/825) than reported witnessing such medical errors in other nurses (13.1%, 108/825).

[3] Likewise, significantly fewer respondents self-reported missing important clinical information because of mobile phone-related distractions (4%, 33/825) than reported witnessing other nurses missing important clinical information (29.9%, 246/825).

If we can believe these reports about the performance of colleagues, this suggests that the negative effects of smartphone-use in healthcare settings are

An important social aspect of smartphone-distraction that emerges from some of these studies is that respondents report being distracted by the smartphone-use of nearby others.

significant, and as indicated above, these effects are underreported in self-reports.

The risks are perceived to be serious enough by the healthcare profession itself that many hospitals have developed policies aimed at curbing distraction, and some medical organisations have published position statements that include guidelines about personal technology. For example, in 2020, the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses (AORN) published a position statement entitled ‘Managing Distractions and Noise During Perioperative Patient Care’. The statement includes the following relevant points: “During critical phases of the surgical procedure, surgical team members should create a no-interruption zone in which nonessential conversation and activities are prohibited. Distractions and noise cannot be eliminated completely from the perioperative environment; therefore, AORN is committed to advocating for a controlled environment in which distractions and noise are minimised to the greatest extent possible.” While the statement is focused on distractions generally, a good portion of the rationale has to do with smartphones and personal technology generally.

The American College of Surgeons (ACS) has also published a ‘Statement on distractions in the operating room’. ACS recommends that this information be included in training programs for operating-room personnel. The statement begins in this way:

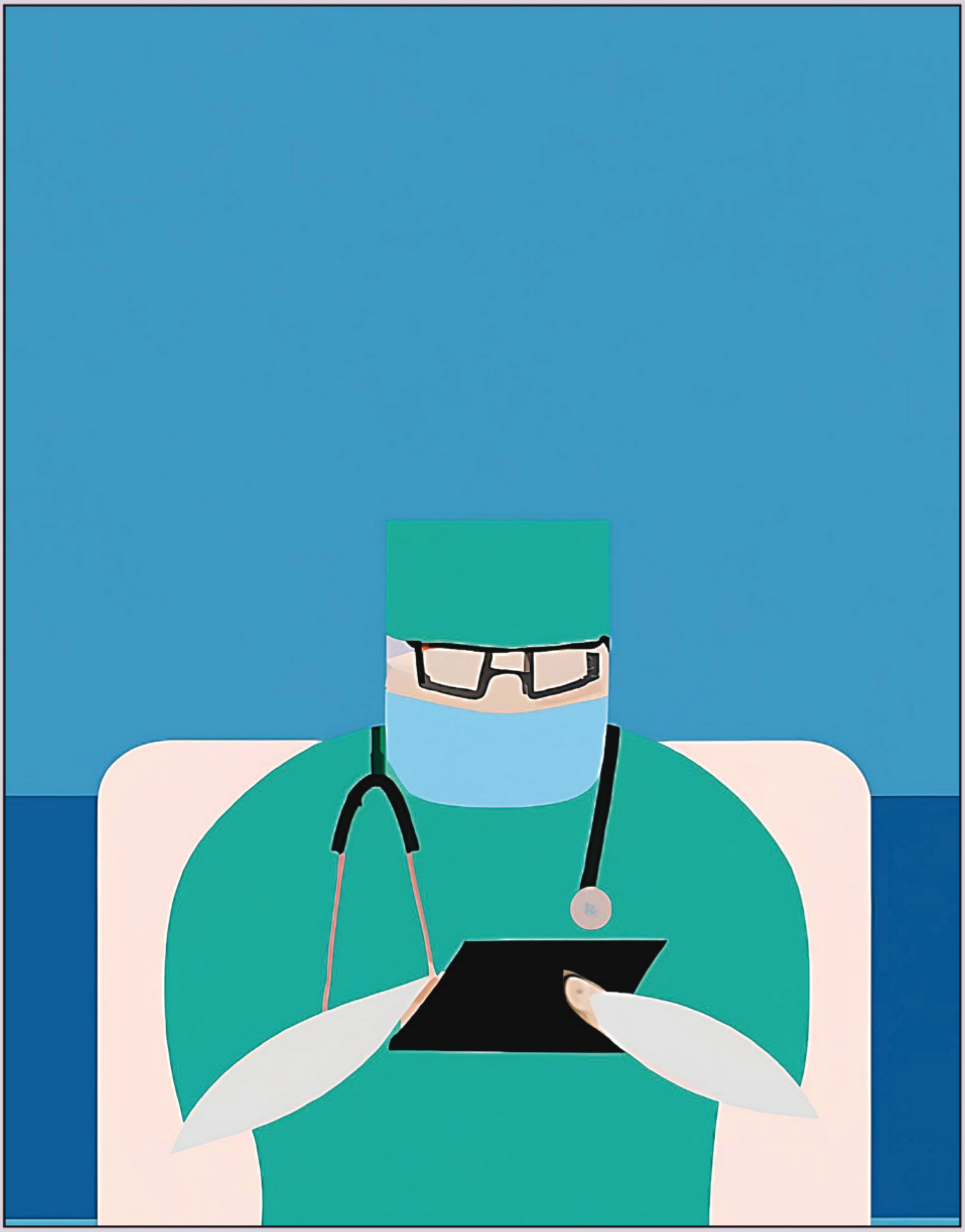
“There are many opportunities for distraction in the operating room (OR). Some can be attributed to the introduction of new technology, such as smartphone and mobile technology, and some are a function of noise levels, unnecessary conversation, and other variables that dilute the focus of perioperative team members because their attention is drawn ‘to . . . different object[s] or different directions at the same time’. Because of the deleterious effects of distraction on cognitive processing and the performance of complex tasks and because of the potential impact of distraction on patient safety, it is important to recognise and mitigate the risks of distraction in the OR.”

Note that cognitive processing was raised in the above quotation, referring to the performance costs involved in multitasking.

In a section entitled, ‘Distractions arising from technology’, ACS refers specifically to smartphones, drawing a distinction between on-task smartphone-use for accessing patient data (etc.) and off-task “undisciplined use”, by which they mean use for social media, email, calls, and so on. ACS then offers guidance for smartphone-use in the OR in the form of ten considerations. They emphasise that undisciplined smartphone-use “may pose a distraction and may compromise patient care”. Specific guidelines include: “Whenever possible, members of the OR team, including the operating surgeon, should only engage in urgent or emergent outside communication during an operation.”

Smartphone-distraction in the healthcare profession is enough of a concern that hundreds of studies have been undertaken, and the results have caused numerous hospitals and healthcare organisations to publish guidelines aimed at curbing off-task smartphone-use in healthcare settings.

Extract from Distracted from Meaning, *by Tiger Roholt, 2023, reprinted with permission from Bloomsbury.*



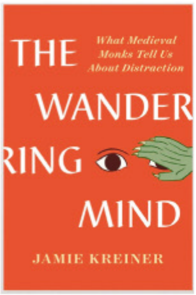
"The negative effects of smartphone-use in healthcare settings are significant, and … these effects are under-reported in self-reports."

Tiger Roholt

Artwork: New Philosopher

Our library

The Wandering Mind



Jamie Kreiner

Golden Age

Our sense that distraction is getting worse carries ominous implications. Journalists and scientists tell us that distraction has serious consequences, among them unproductivity, chronic boredom, sleep deprivation, bad grades, weak relationships, car crashes, a lack of personal fulfilment, and a loss of civic solidarity. Even in small doses, at a safe distance from heavy machinery, it can still be maddening. At times like ours, when it feels like things are declining rapidly, the distant past can seem especially alluring. Historians know this impulse well: many societies in states of flux have looked to earlier eras in search of a lost and supposedly more stable Golden Age.

The Shallows

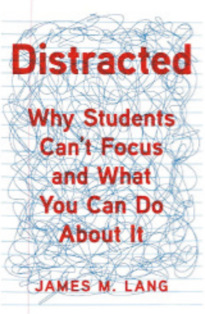
THE SHALLOWS
HOW THE INTERNET IS CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK, READ AND REMEMBER
NICHOLAS CARR

Nicholas Carr

A meditative act

Even the earliest silent readers recognised the striking change in their consciousness that took place as they immersed themselves in the pages of a book. The medieval bishop Isaac of Syria described how, whenever he read to himself, “as in a dream, I enter a state when my sense and thoughts are concentrated. Then, when with prolonging of this silence the turmoil of memories is stilled in my heart, ceaseless waves of joy are sent me by inner thoughts, beyond expectation suddenly arising to delight my heart.” Reading a book was a meditative act, but it didn’t involve a clearing of the mind. It involved a filling, or replenishing, of the mind. Readers disengaged their attention from the outward flow of passing stimuli in order to engage it more deeply with an inward flow of words, ideas, and emotions.

Distracted: Why Students Can’t Focus



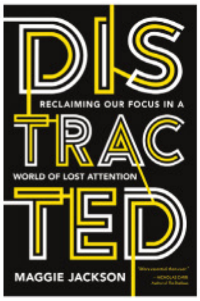
James M. Lang

Minds in motion

When we come into the classroom, everyone arrives trailing clouds of distraction from whatever prior activities and thoughts have been occupying our attention. We might be obsessing over a text from a loved one, indignant about the latest outrage perpetrated by our least favourite politician, or thinking about the lunch we just ate or the one we’ll be having after class. Students are talking to their peers, swiping through their Instagram feeds, and worrying about their dwindling bank accounts. From this state of minds in motion, we expect students to grind the spinning wheels to a sudden halt and focus on string theory, or institutional racism, or existentialism. We should not wonder that they have difficulty drawing the class into focus – or that we have the same difficulties.

Food for thought from the *New Philosopher* library. We discover books that can change the way you view the world.

Distracted

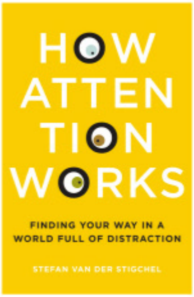


Maggie Jackson

A dark age

Are we heading into a dark age? To ask this question is first to wonder whether we at present have much of a collective appetite for wrestling meaningfully with uncertainties, and whether we have the will to carve out havens of deep thinking amid the tempests of time. To deepen the riddle, note that there are likely as many definitions of a dark age as there are lost civilizations buried beneath the earth's shifting sod and sand. To the late urban studies guru Jane Jacobs, a dark age is a "cultural collapse" that leads to an "abyss of forgetfulness." Anthropologist Joseph Tainter treats a dark age as simply a decline in literacy, a kind of minor player in the larger economic and political drama of collapse. Perhaps no two scholars holding a mirror to the past will see quite the same reflection.

How Attention Works



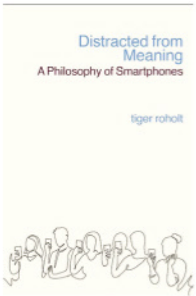
Stefan van der Stigchel

To no avail

Less than a year after the tunnel was reopened, a 63-year-old motorcyclist suffered serious injuries when he failed to notice that the extra tunnel was closed and crashed straight into the barrier. It was the twentieth such accident since the renovation job. The authorities tried to warn road users more effectively by hanging up additional warning signs, using vehicle-mounted flashing arrows, and installing steel traffic cones. In addition, the barrier itself was fitted with flashing LED lights and made to appear larger.

The warnings were all to no avail. Drivers continued to crash into the barrier at high speed without even taking their foot off the gas.

Distracted from Meaning



Tiger Roholt

True multi-tasking

When I discuss smartphone-distraction with students, some acknowledge that off-task smartphone-use in class may negatively affect academic performance; other students are of the opinion that their extensive experience with multitasking enables them to manage such situations well. The latter idea is that they can pay attention to what is happening in class in addition to, occasionally, paying attention to what is happening within their smartphones. Some social scientists who write about smartphone-distraction claim that there is no such thing as true multitasking. For example, Michelle Fei writes: "Unfortunately, there is a very real limit to the ability of the human brain to multitask. True multitasking refers to performing two tasks simultaneously. This is something the human brain is not able to do."

Documentaries

To view the documentaries below and many others, visit
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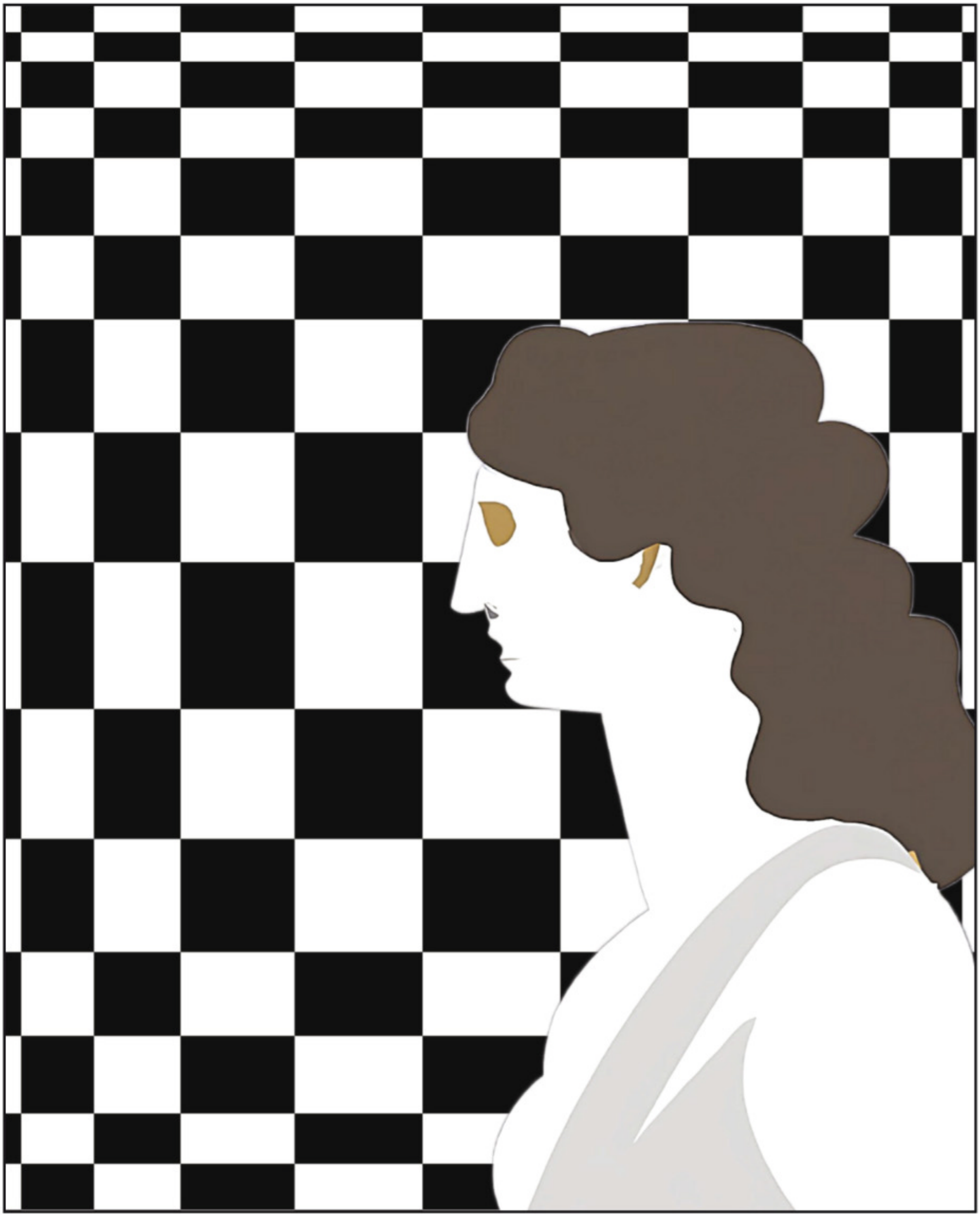
DSKNECTD

DSKNECTD: Is Technology Changing Us? is a sobering and definitive exploration of how digital communication technology has intruded upon our lives, and changed society in the process. Covering subjects ranging from social media narcissism to gaming addiction, DSKNECTD surveys the changes to the digital landscape that in just one decade have profoundly altered the way we connect to those around us. Intelligently crafted from groundbreaking new research and the experiences of ordinary people, DSKNECTD examines how these technologies are changing the way we interact and experience each other – for good and for bad.

Multitasking

Can humans multitask? Scientists are examining how trying to do as many things as possible at the same time is affecting our brains – and our souls.

Making phone calls while driving, checking social media at work, listening to music while studying, maintaining efficiency while working from home. Many companies still regard the capacity to multitask as a crucial workplace skill. But is this approach to work and life really effective? This documentary explores the phenomenon through a wide variety of disciplinary lenses, including kinesiology, neuroscience, occupational psychology, business management, and sociology.



> “Hardly any faculty is more important for the intellectual progress of man than the power of Attention… Animals clearly manifest this power, as when a cat watches by a hole and prepares to spring on its prey.”

Charles Darwin

Artwork by New Philosopher

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You have introduced such a wonderfully fresh & intelligent publication to expand our minds & hearts. Thank you.

I feel like I have been waiting for this magazine all my life.

In a country so defined by the shallow, crass propaganda and cognitive conformity coming out of its papers, magazines, and broadcasters, yours is a true gem. You have no idea how happy I was to discover it, it has given me hope for the future of this country's media landscape and for the public discussion emanating from it.

I have to say that it is a tremendous relief and joy that your publication has arrived. Your magazine provides oxygen to the soul. I have often felt alone, alienated or old-fashioned in my outlook but now know I have a soulmate to reflect and take action with, namely *New Philosopher*.

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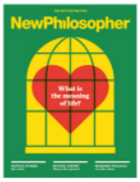
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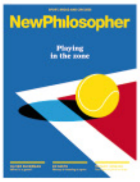
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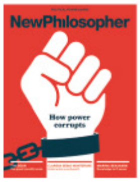
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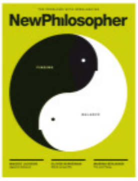
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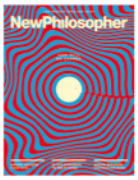
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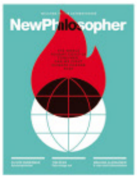
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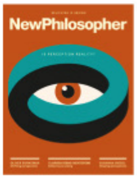
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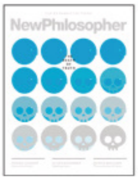
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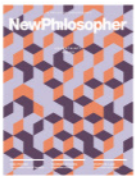
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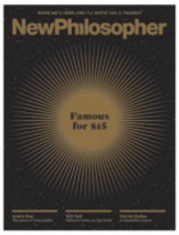
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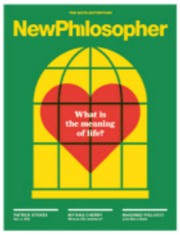
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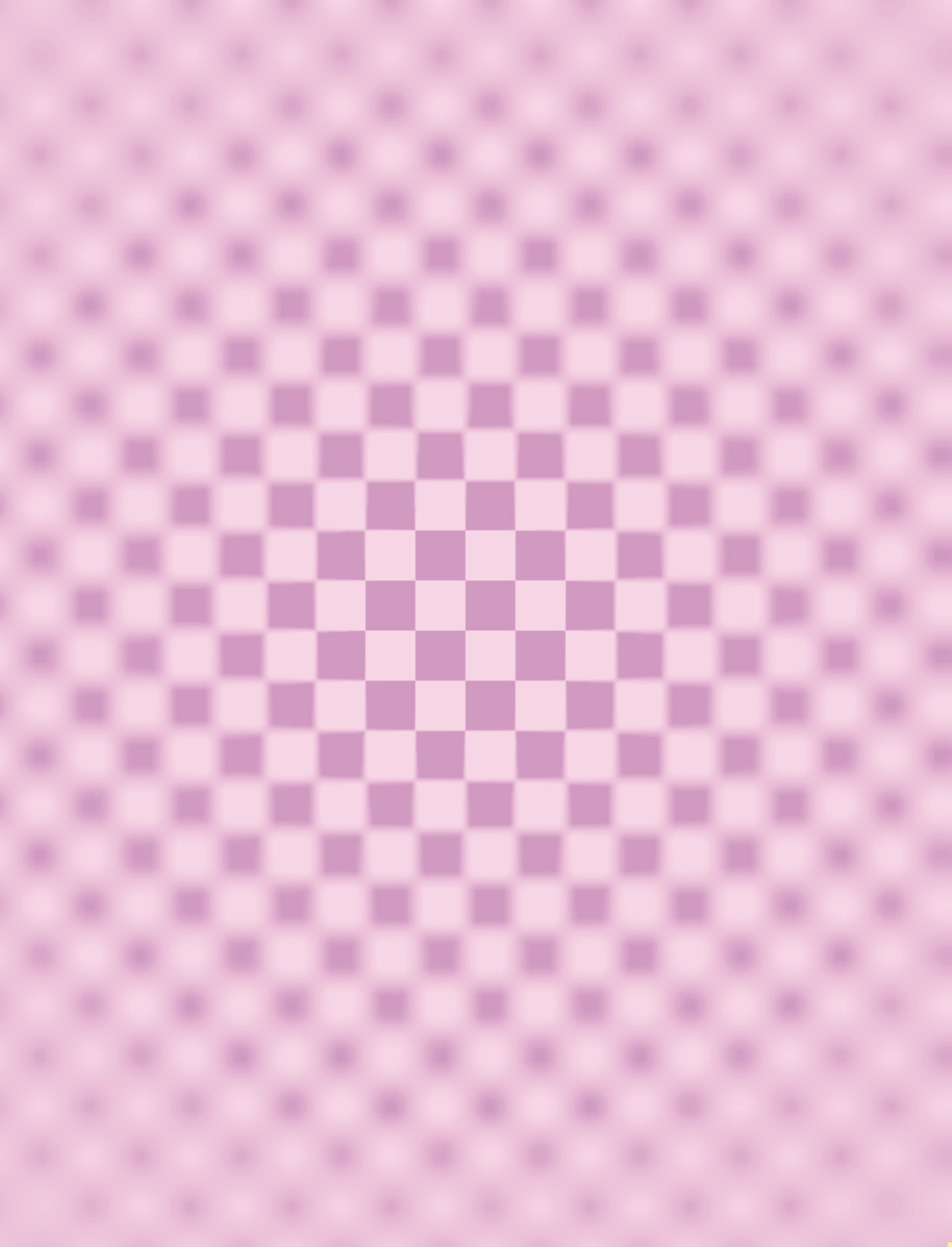

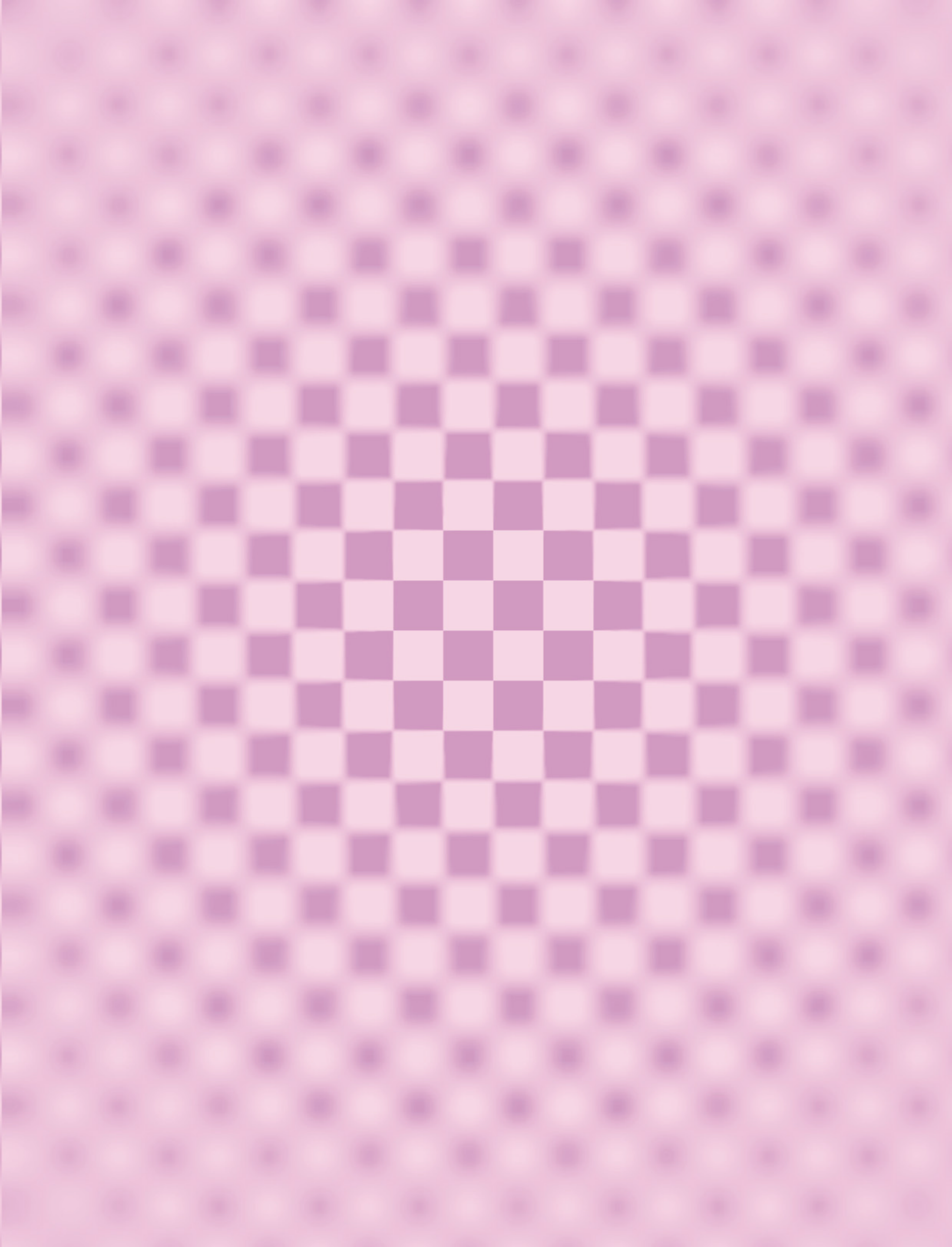

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